

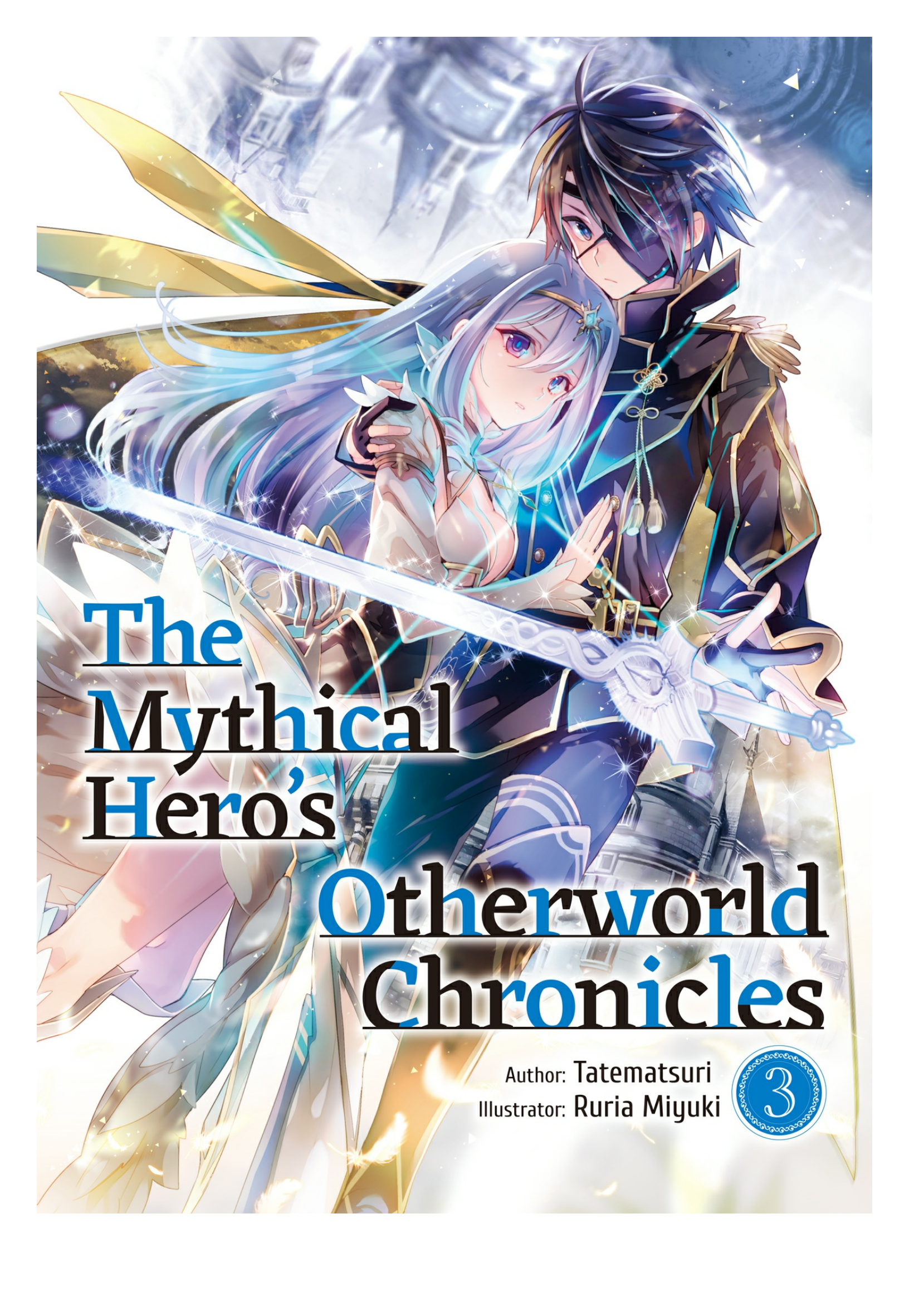


The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles

Author: Tatematsuri
Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki







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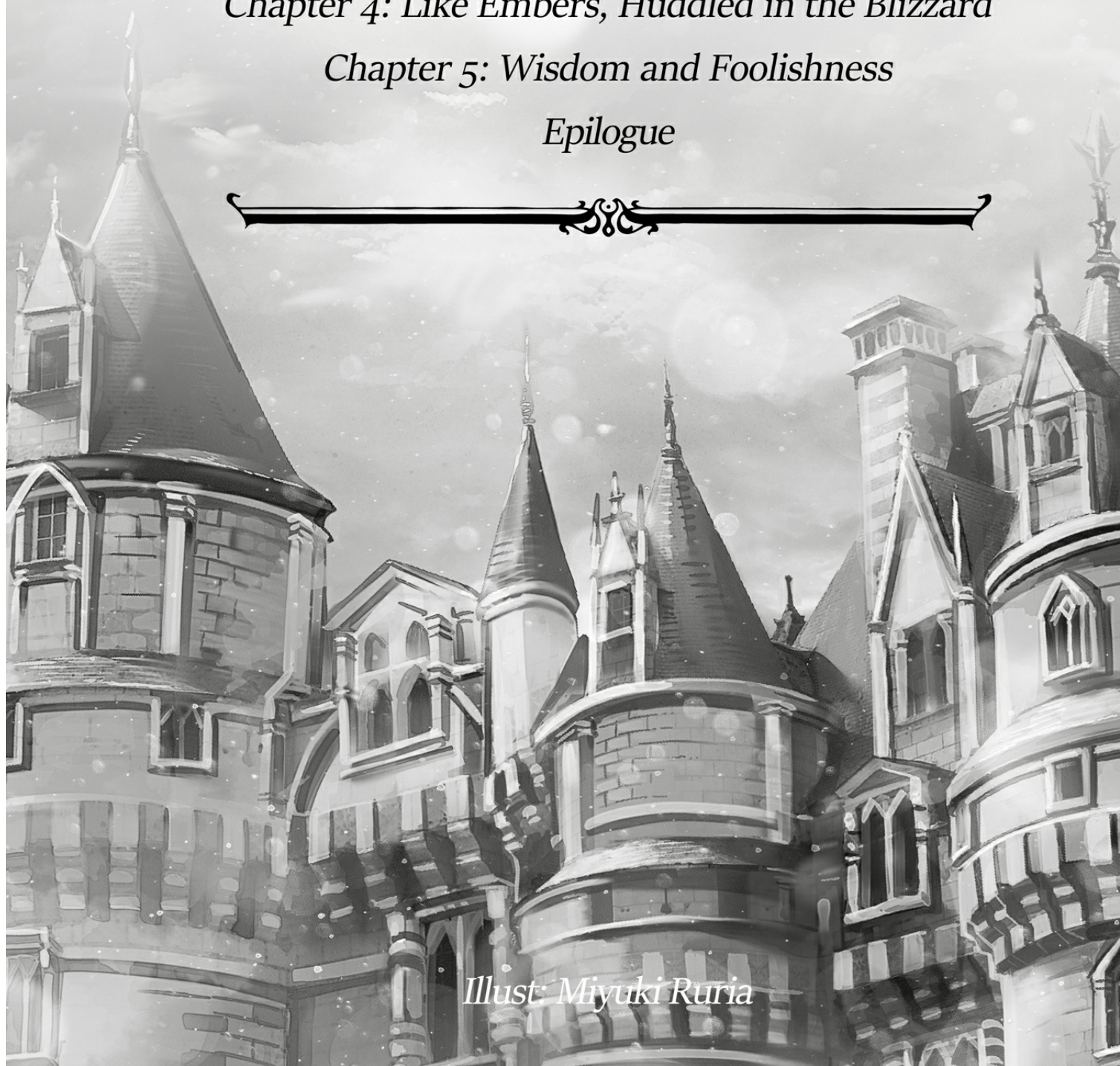
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Illust: Miyuki Ruria

Prologue

The frozen sky was empty of stars. Heavy clouds streamed overhead, obscuring the light of the moon. In the darkness below, a gale howled like a starving beast.

“This way! Hurry!”

Her voice cut as sharp as the wind through the blinding snowstorm, urging him on. The boy in black raised his head, but the blizzard obscured the speaker’s face.

She hurried back to his side, her hand outstretched in an offer of aid. “Are you all right?”

His pace was flagging, as anyone’s would if they had fought his battles.

“I’ll be fine. Just keep going. If we stop now, we’ll freeze to death.”

“At least they can’t follow us,” she said. “Although at this rate, the blizzard might do their job for them.”

He took her fingers in his and found them ice-cold. They did not have long. Warmth might be too much to hope for, but finding shelter was imperative. Once the blizzard passed, they would be on the run again, and that would take every last ounce of strength they could conserve.

“There.” He pointed to a cattle shed. It would keep the wind off well enough and help them retain some warmth. “No one will be working the fields this late, so...” He caught himself. “Of course, if you’d rather somewhere else...”

His companion was of royal blood. Her pride might not allow her to sleep where beasts of burden lay their heads.

The young woman squeezed his hand tightly, showing him that his concerns were unfounded. “Never fear. Nobody would ever believe that a princess spent the night in a stall.” She stepped forward and turned around, pressing a finger to a mischievous smile. “But you must promise not to tell. The people would

faint if they knew.”

He raised his arms with a theatrical sigh. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

No matter what ordeals lay ahead, they were in this together now—but the blizzard only grew fiercer, mocking their efforts with its laughter.

Chapter 1: A New Problem

Berg Fortress was the Grantzian Empire's southern bastion. Situated on the empire's border with the Duchy of Lichtein, its high walls protected it from enemy assault. Its most prominent feature was the large central tower, which housed the war room.

On the tower's third floor was a study, and in the study was a boy, stirring awake as the light of the morning sun streamed in through the window. His hair and eyes were black as night, but his soft, handsome features were made unsettling by the oversized eyepatch that covered half of his face.

Before coming to Aletia, his name had been Hiro Oguro. Now that the emperor had accepted him as his son and installed him as the fourth prince of the empire, his name was Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.

"Nnngh..."

He yawned. A trill of birdsong rapped at the window, pricking at his ears. He sat upright, dislodging a book, which knocked over one of the piles around him. They all went down like dominoes.

"Another night in the study..." Hiro scratched his cheek awkwardly as he surveyed the devastation. "Liz will be furious."

Eating and sleeping here was fast becoming a habit. He did have a bedroom of his own, but it was on the second floor. With the study on the third floor, going back and forth had been a pain, so he had ended up succumbing to laziness and taking up permanent residence amid the bookshelves.

"Don't blame me," he protested to empty air. "I've got a lot of reading to do."

Another stack of books collapsed at his feet. Cerberus emerged from the toppled pile. Native to the islands of the east, the white wolf was a rare sight in Soleil. Liz had found her washed up on the nation's shores as a puppy and taken care of her ever since. She claimed the two of them were like sisters.

"You too, huh?" Hiro murmured.

Cerberus had staked a claim to the third floor, so that was nothing unusual. If anything, the rest of the fortress was beginning to acknowledge her authority. The soldiers were afraid to tread there without her permission.

“Making sure I don’t freeze to death?”

A sweep of her tail was the wolf’s only response. Hiro watched her a little longer, but she didn’t seem inclined to say anything more.

He shrugged and stood up. “Fine, be like that. I’d better get back to my room before Liz sees me.” He pressed an ear to the thick wooden door and then, hearing there was nobody outside, turned around and pressed a finger to his lips. “Not a sound, all right, Cerberus?”

Don’t bother, the white wolf’s yawn seemed to say. *It won’t work.*

Hiro smiled, giving her head a scratch. “Come on, it’ll be fine. It’s breakfast time right now. She’ll be in the mess hall.”

The haughty wolf gave him an unimpressed look. Her nose twitched and she snorted dismissively. Hiro wondered what she meant by that. He didn’t have to wait long for an answer.

“Hiro! You slept in the study again, didn’t you?! How many times do I have to tell you?! You’ll catch a cold!”

A voice like a scolding mother rang out from down the hallway, accompanied by the thunder of footsteps.

“Uh-oh. What now?”

Hiro looked to Cerberus for help, but the wolf only flattened her ears. *Traitor.* He cast a glance at the window, debating for a moment whether it was worth jumping through—a moment that cost him the chance to escape.

“HIRO!”

The door crashed open. Chilly morning air rolled through the study. A girl stood in the doorway with hands on hips, her cheeks puffed out angrily. Her crimson hair shimmered like fire, and her eyes glinted like rubies beneath a shapely brow any sculptor would have been proud of. The smoothness of her porcelain skin drew the gaze of young and old alike. This was the commander of

Berg Fortress and the sixth princess of the empire, Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz. Her friends called her Liz.

Hiro turned to face her with a forced smile. “G-Good morning! Can I help you?”

“Morning!” Liz returned his greeting with a breezy smile, then her face almost immediately clouded with anger. “But don’t think you can talk your way out of this one, mister. Why aren’t you sleeping in your own room? There isn’t even a bed in here! You’re on the floor! You’ll hurt your back, and don’t even get me started on the cold you’ll catch!” She stopped to catch her breath and lowered her gaze despondently. “I’m worried about you. Are you *trying* to make yourself ill?”

“I’m fine,” Hiro protested. “The books keep the heat in.”

“Oh, for—!” Liz’s eyes narrowed. By the time Hiro realized he had misspoken, it was too late. Her hand snapped out toward his face. He braced for pain, but—

“No more excuses. Sleep in your own bed from now on, all right?”

“Yesh.”

Liz had only tugged at his cheeks in admonishment. Guilt flooded Hiro’s chest. He would rather have been slapped. After such an earnest warning, he couldn’t find the heart to argue.

“Good. Take care of yourself, okay? I mean it.” Liz patted his cheek. “Now then, let’s get breakfast!” She skipped ahead as she broke into her usual grin.

“Yeah. Let’s.” With a rueful smile, Hiro joined Liz and Cerberus and left the study.

Berg Fortress’s mess hall was located on the first floor of the central tower. The Fourth Legion had just finished their morning training, and the lunch ladies were being kept on their feet catering to the flood of soldiers. Hiro made his way through the throng toward the officers’ tables, Cerberus at his side.

Tris was already there, gazing dejectedly at a plate of long-cooled food. A third class military tribune, the old soldier had served Liz since she was old enough to walk.

He turned to glare at Hiro. “My breakfast’s gotten cold, whelp.”

“Right. Sorry. That’s my fault.”

“You needn’t apologize, Your Highness. Sir Tarmier ought to have had better foresight.” Second Tribune Drix appeared from behind Hiro with a tray of food in one hand. He took a seat next to Tris. “Good morning, Your Highness.”

“Good morning.”

Tris glanced at Hiro’s hands. “You’ve no food, I see. Shall I fetch you some?”

“No need. Liz is getting something for me.”

Tris’s eyes flashed with anger, and his shoulders began to tremble. “She’s a princess, whelp, not your serving girl.”

Drix gave the man a conciliatory pat on the shoulder. “All too often, imperial heirs are at one another’s throats. Should we not be grateful that these two are such fast friends?”

Tris deflated a little. “Aye, I suppose you’re right at that.”

The two had barely gotten to know each other, but Drix had already gotten the hang of curbing Tris’s ire. Hiro sat down opposite him, silently impressed.

At that moment, Liz appeared, bearing a tray in both hands. “Here we are,” she announced, laying a platter of steaming meat in front of Hiro with a thud. “Eat up, won’t you?”

“All that? I couldn’t. I’d give myself a stomachache.”

“Some of it’s for Cerberus. I know how she steals off your plate.”

“Right.”

Liz had thought this through. A lot of Hiro’s meals did seem to find their way into Cerberus’s belly, but even a hungry wolf couldn’t polish off a plate this size. Liz had evidently been taking her strategy lessons to heart. It was gratifying to see how much she had grown.

“In that case, I don’t mind if I do.”

Hiro put his hands together in thanks, while Tris and Drix set about attending to their plates. For a while they ate.

Eventually, Drix set his cutlery down and turned to Hiro. “Lord Hiro, Lady Celia Estrella, I have collated a report regarding the freedmen.”

The former slaves who had once fought with the Liberation Army had been settled in temporary accommodations outside the fortress. For the time being, Liz and the soldiers were keeping them supplied with food and water, but such support could not last forever. Hiro had put Drix in charge of getting them back on their feet as quickly as possible.

“I have dispatched the relevant documents to Lord von Gurinda. Along with your letter, of course, my lady.”

“Thank you,” Liz said. “Uncle will see them treated well.”

“I do not doubt that your lord uncle has a good heart.” Drix’s gaze flicked back to Hiro. “However, I would caution against assuming that Lichtein’s loss will necessarily mean the Gurinda Mark’s gain.” He picked up his goblet of water and drained it, wetting his parched throat. “The land we hope to acquire may be given to any number of other southern nobles, and it seems to me that would rather foil our plans.”

“I see why you’re worried, but don’t be.” Hiro shot Drix a reassuring smile. “We’ll get what we need. The southern nobles will be too busy squabbling over House Nikkel’s lands to worry about us.”

House Nikkel was the house of the late General von Kilo. Their lands had the temperate climate of the central territories but the dryness of the south, with rainfall too meager to support tall trees. The result was grassland ideal for raising livestock. With the southern regions starved for resources, most nobles there made their living trading in stagecoaches and war horses. They would jump at the chance to seize House Nikkel’s assets.

“An intentional distraction, I take it?”

Hiro nodded. He had ensured that the blame for the losses of the Lichtein campaign fell on von Kilo’s shoulders. House Nikkel would now be pursued for compensation, and with no head of house, they would struggle to fend off their creditors. The southern nobles would descend on them like vultures on a corpse. If they were lucky, they might retain a portion of their lands; if not, they would forfeit it all, but they had no chance of surviving unscathed.

“Besides, the big prize is the oasis city we annexed. All eyes will be there. No one’s going to care about us laying claim to an empty wasteland.”

The territory they wanted was a swathe of undeveloped land on the border between Lichtein and the empire. For fear of provoking conflict, the duchy had never made any effort to settle it. Still, the region would flourish with a little irrigation. They would draw water from the Gurinda Mark and give a portion to the freedmen to cultivate. In the longer term, they could dig wells, prospect for ore, or any number of other things.

“The freedmen get jobs and Uncle’s land prospers,” Liz chirped. “We’re killing two birds with one stone.”

Hiro concurred, but that wasn’t all. The more Kiork prospered, the higher he would rise among the southern nobles. That, in turn, would shore up Liz’s position and bring her closer to the throne. There was only one problem...

“Still,” Liz continued, “this will all take time.”

Hiro nodded in silent agreement. His concerns were better kept to himself.

“Very well, then. I will continue making my clandestine preparations with the margrave, on the assumption that the land will be ours.” Seemingly appeased, Drix returned to his meal.

Hiro set about silently shoveling meat into his mouth, but a burning gaze from the next seat over distracted him. It was hard to concentrate with Liz staring at him like that.

He swallowed and turned to her. “Um... Do you want some?”

“Do you mind?”

“Not at all. I kind of got the sense you were interested.”

“Well, you seemed to be enjoying it so much...”

“All right, then. Here.”

Hiro held out a piece of meat. With an “Aaah,” it vanished between Liz’s perfect teeth.

Only after she had swallowed it did Hiro notice the attention they were

attracting. Tris was breathing so loudly, it sounded like he was hyperventilating. Drix shook his head with a knowing smile. One of the nearby officers whistled.

“Hiro! Another!”

Liz grabbed on to Hiro’s arm like a bird demanding a pellet, but he didn’t have the nerve to feed her again amid the storm of withering stares.

“Come on, come on! Give me another!” Liz insisted.

She didn’t seem to have noticed—or perhaps she was well aware. Either way, he needed a plan, and a good one. Too unsubtle and Liz would see right through it. Too blunt and he would invite the wrath of Tris, who was simmering just across the table.

One wrong step, and I’m toast...

But the man once known as Mars was not out of schemes. Cerberus had just appeared at his feet.

You know what to do.

Their eyes met. They needed no words. They understood each other perfectly. Cerberus bounded onto the table and tore into Hiro’s plate.

“Stop it, Cerberus!” Liz cried. “That’s rude!”

“Don’t be so harsh. She has to eat too.”

“Mmph?!”

Hiro pushed the last of the meat into Liz’s mouth, silencing her for a crucial moment. By the time she finished chewing, Cerberus had cleaned the plate, leaped down to the floor and trotted merrily away.

“What am I going to do with her?” Liz sighed. “Well, I suppose I’d better eat.”

Now that the wolf had made good her escape, there was nothing more to be done. Liz flopped back into her chair and started on her food.

Hiro breathed a sigh of relief. He would finish breakfast hungry, but he had escaped worse...or at least, so he thought, until Liz’s next words sent a chill through him.

“Here, to make up for it. Say ‘Aaah.’”

“Wait, no—”

His suffering was far from over. Another chaotic day was just beginning.



*

After breakfast, Hiro parted ways with Liz and headed to the courtyard. Vigorous cries rang out, growing louder as he approached. There were more than a few; close to a hundred voices shook the air in chorus. He stopped as a group of soldiers came into view, swinging swords in neat ranks.

“Not bad. They’re starting to look like a real army.”

All kinds of practice were afoot. Some soldiers were sparring. Others drilled with staves. In the corner of Hiro’s eye, a group of men pointed bows at targets. Heavy armor, light armor, even robes were on display. The only constant was the uniform black of their garb, which made the sight seem slightly surreal. An officer stood in front of the various groups, issuing commands. From a small dais a short distance away, the drill instructor surveyed the recruits with a brooding gaze.

Hiro approached and looked up at the figure. “Everything seems to be going smoothly.”

The man was enormous, covered from head to toe in fluted armor, but he leaped nimbly down to the ground when he noticed Hiro.

“They’d have made a poor living if they didn’t know how to hold a sword.”

The drilling soldiers had once been sellswords in the Liberation Army. After taking them prisoner, Hiro had accepted anyone who was willing into his service. More than half had dropped out, unable to withstand the harsh training, but around three thousand still remained.

The man continued. “May I ask the purpose of the matching colors?”

A stipend from the widowed Countess von Kelheit had paid for the soldiers’ arms and armor, but there was only so much that could be done at short notice. The world’s finest blacksmith working at the land’s largest smithy could not outfit several thousand men in the span of days. Even just engraving their armor with a common motif would take too long. As a stopgap measure, Hiro had bought up all of the black armor he could find from the neighboring towns, ensuring that they at least matched in appearance.

“A common uniform will make an enemy cautious, regardless of how skilled our soldiers are. It’s just a shame they aren’t better trained. We could make good use of the reverse.”

That was a harsh assessment. It would take trickery, Hiro was saying, to make the force useful.

The instructor didn’t agree or disagree, but his lips pulled into a sardonic smile beneath his helmet. “They’ll put the Fourth Legion to shame when I’m through with them. Or better yet, any other force in the empire.”

“I’m glad to hear it. We still have their old gear in the storehouse. I hope someday we can make use of it.”

“That day won’t be long in coming.”

The man lifted his visor to reveal the distinctive lilac skin of a zlosta. His eyes gleamed with a sharpness that would give a seasoned warrior pause, while his imposing bulk, even hidden by his armor, radiated an aura of might.

Technically, zlosta no longer existed in Soleil. The Kingdom of Lebering to the north of the empire was known as the land of the zlosta, but long centuries of mixing with other peoples had watered down even the royal line. Garda Meteor, however, was a true pureblood, washed up on the shores of the continent from the southern archipelago of Ambition. For fear of causing a disturbance, and with Hiro concerned for his safety, he had elected to wear full armor at all times, even in the searing midday heat. That was the best way to conceal the color of his skin and the manastone in his forehead.

“So what if we had to ride to battle today?” Hiro asked. “Could they pull their weight?”

“Well enough on their own, although much would depend on the skill of their foe. Still, they would struggle to fight in concert with the Fourth Legion.”

“That’ll do.”

Garda’s eyes narrowed. “Do you foresee war on the horizon?”

Hiro let the question go unanswered. He looked up at the sky. White clouds adorned the blue expanse, through which the sun’s rays fell upon the land. The

breeze retained some coolness for now, but it would soon turn into a muggy desert wind. Today would be another scorching day.

Hiro looked back at Garda with a knowing smile. "It's only common sense to prepare for the worst."

"I'll not argue with that. But there's more to this than caution, isn't there?"

"There are signs. I can't say for certain, but I suspect it's only a matter of time."

Hiro's reply was vague, but Garda probed no further. He nodded reassuringly. "Then I'll train the men as well as that time permits."

The zlosta lowered his visor and surveyed the soldiers drilling in the courtyard. To see them cry out in unison as they thrust their spears, a naive observer might take them for an elite fighting force. Still, a veteran would see the roughness lingering around the edges. It would be their commander's place to compensate for what they lacked. Everything would come down to how they were used.

"I hope so. I need them ready to do anything I ask of them—and I do mean anything."

"They'll not improve that quickly short of sending them into a real battle."

"I agree. Often, people don't realize what they're really capable of until their lives are on the line." Hiro's mouth curled into a wicked grin, like that of a child up to mischief. "Which is why I want you to pit them against the local bandits. Lowlife criminals probably won't put up much of a fight, but we'll take what we can get. And I've had word that deserters from the ducal army have been banding together to cause trouble."

"Are they far?"

"They're entrenched in caverns and canyons across the prairie. It seems they set up there during the chaos of the war." Hiro handed Garda two pieces of parchment. "Choose the one you like. The Fourth Legion will take the other."

Garda took the sheets of parchment and looked them over.

"The first group is holed up in a cavern a day's ride east," Hiro continued.

“Fifty men or so. The second make their base in a gorge a day to the south, near Threst—Mille’s village. Three hundred. They have Lichtein deserters among their number, with more joining by the day. Three hundred might be a low count by the time we get there. Which do you want?”

“Who do you take me for? The gorge, of course. What else should I know? By when must this be done?”

“As quickly as possible. We’ll take eight hundred men. Aiming to be back in two days, and with time to rest the horses, we’ll have about an hour and a half for fighting.”

“You ask a great deal.”

“I can’t make it too easy. Otherwise, the men wouldn’t learn anything.”

“Very well. How would the One-Eyed Dragon go about this?”

“There are only three hundred of them. I would ride in alone and—” *Wipe them out*, Hiro almost said, but a glare from Garda stopped the words dead in his throat. *Only you could do that*, the zlosta’s eyes seemed to say.

Hiro pretended to ignore it, striking a thoughtful pose. “But enough joking around. No, the enemy is holed up in an enclosed space. We have numbers, but that won’t mean a thing if we can’t make use of them. And the bandits will know their own base like the backs of their hands. It’s safe to assume they’ll use the terrain to their advantage. If we let our guard down, we could suffer far worse losses than we’re prepared for. So if it were me, I’d try to draw them out and turn the tables.” He paused for a moment, then set a finger to his lips and smiled. “It might be quicker to show you. How soon can you get ready to march?”

Garda snorted. “Do you take the men I’ve trained for slouches? They’re sellswords no longer, I can tell you that.”

The zlosta minced words for no one, not even a prince of the empire. If a sworn servant of the royal family had heard the way he addressed Hiro, they would have bared steel. Drix, fastidious as he was, might have fainted.

Hiro, however, only chuckled. “That’s encouraging to hear.”

His subordinates might disapprove, but as long as he didn't mind, none of their complaints bore any weight. That easygoing nature and approachable demeanor had cemented his popularity among the Fourth Legion as second only to Liz. Still, it was necessary to keep up appearances in front of the troops—something Garda clearly understood too, as he was excruciatingly polite whenever he addressed Hiro in public. While it made for an amusing sight, they could only speak frankly to one another when they were sure they would not be interrupted.

"I'll leave the rest to you," Hiro said.

"Very well. The men will need a moment to rest, but we'll set off as soon as we're able."

Hiro turned to leave, then wheeled back around as though a sudden thought had struck him. "Oh, and if you could... Let's bring that old gear with us after all."

"Hm?" Garda's brow furrowed for a moment, but then realization flashed in his eyes. He nodded. "Aye, I'll see it done."

"Right, I'd best be going. I have my own preparations to make."

Hiro waved goodbye and walked away. Behind him, Garda's booming voice commanded the soldiers to stand at ease.

*

Eight hundred riders trailed a cloud of dust as they raced across the prairie. They came to a stop in the shadow of the cliffs, one sel—or three kilometers—from their destination. Hiro's Crow Legion could not yet match the Fourth Legion in discipline, but they made for no less striking a sight.

"Time to root these bandits out." Hiro signaled to his rear. The line of cavalry parted to reveal a hundred-odd soldiers outfitted in sellsword garb. Two dozen more were dressed as peasants, pulling carts. The group proceeded together toward the narrow path through the cliffs where the bandits made their stronghold.

"First and Second Cavalry: as instructed," Hiro commanded.

Under cover of the dust cloud raised by the carts, the two units peeled off to either side. They began to advance. One hundred cavalry remained, under the command of Hiro and his advisor, Garda.

“I pray all goes as planned,” the zlostá growled, “but these bandits are no striplings. They’ll see through this child’s play.”

“You’d be surprised how easy people are to fool. Under the right circumstances, a veteran can be more gullible than a novice.”

Hiro turned to squint into the distance. Garda followed his gaze. Ahead, the soldiers in peasants’ clothing had come to a stop in front of the mouth of the gorge.

“They’re probably being questioned as we speak,” Hiro said. “Do you think the bandits will take the bait?”

“Many will suspect a trap.”

“That’s what the carts are for. To sweeten the deal.”

The carts were piled high with arms and armor. Any outlaw would jump at the chance to get their hands on such a haul. The bandits had no wealth with which to purchase new equipment and no means of seizing it, but they would soon need gear if they meant to feed themselves with their takings. With that in mind, Hiro had disguised his soldiers as traveling merchants.

“Do you not think one hundred guards is too many?” Garda asked.

“Any fewer wouldn’t be believable.”

“And what if they make the bandits too wary to come out?”

Garda’s point was a good one. The bandits only had three hundred men. The sight of one hundred soldiers might deter them from leaving the gorge in force. Even so, they would send a small party out to threaten their marks with superior numbers and demand the contents of the cart.

“In that case, the men have orders to attack.”

“Oh?” Garda’s eyebrows rose. “And what then?”

“They are to provoke the enemy and then retreat back here to us.”

The bandits would be enraged by seeing their comrades slaughtered. They would leave the gorge in pursuit of their fleeing prey—at which point, the First and Second Cavalries would circle around to cut off their retreat before falling on them from behind.

“Swords have been drawn. We should go.”

The battle had begun. A cacophony of clashing steel drifted toward them on the wind. Hiro’s carriage trundled steadily forward. Garda kept pace alongside it, scanning the foreground with reins in hand. With their hundred riders in tow, they moved out from the cover of the cliffs.

“Things seem to have played out more or less as we expected,” Hiro observed.

“And so I eat my words. Now I see why Lichtein fell.”

“They’re still stronger than the average bandits. We can’t get careless just because we have them surrounded.”

Hiro gestured for the remaining hundred riders to join the battle. They sprang into action, thundering past him to enter the fray. By the time he and Garda made it to the scene, the fighting would likely be done.

“I hear that we have arranged to spare the lives of those who surrender,” Garda ventured. “Are you certain?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“The One-Eyed Dragon I know would massacre them without a second thought. I find it strange that you would leave any alive, even those who lay down their swords.”

“There’s a reason for that. If we kill them all, the bodies will attract monsters, and that would cause trouble for the locals.”

Burying or burning the bodies would not solve the problem. Monsters would still be drawn to the stench of blood. They would take up residence in the gorge, and once their food ran out, they would begin to prey on the nearby settlements. There was no point in exterminating bandits only to replace them with worse. The soldiers had been instructed that any enemies who

demonstrated an intention to surrender were not to be harmed.

“They’ve only just lost a war. They’ll give up quickly,” Hiro predicted.

Sure enough, by the time they reached the battlefield, most of the bandits had surrendered. Still, no small number had fallen victim to the cavalry. Only around two hundred had survived the fray. The bodies of the dead would be loaded onto the carts for a separate task force to dispose of somewhere far away. The living would be sentenced to an appropriate punishment decided upon by Drix, who was currently manning Berg Fortress in their absence.

“An easy victory,” Garda remarked. “We hardly needed an hour.”

Hiro smiled and nodded. He hadn’t anticipated a difficult fight, but the Crow Legion had performed better than expected. “We’ll rest for a spell, then return to Berg Fortress.”

Garda turned to the men and began to issue orders. Hiro looked skyward. White clouds drifted lazily across the blue expanse, while the sun’s light pierced through to shower the prairie with scorching heat.

I’ll be summoned to the capital again soon. What will I do with the Crow Legion then?

To send them marching along peaceful roads would only be a waste of time. Better to have them train until his business concluded.

But if I end up sent to Faerzen, I’ll want them with me.

If Aura’s letter from several days prior was to be believed, the situation in the western nation was still fraught. The emperor would be losing his patience. Odds were high that he would send Hiro to finish the conquest, which would provide the Crow Legion with vital experience in the field.

Well, there’s no point dwelling on these things now. I can make that judgment when the time comes.

Hiro wiped away a bead of sweat, loosened his collar, and closed his eyes. Before long, he was dozing, recovering his strength for the trials to come.

*

It was the next day by the time the Crow Legion returned to Berg Fortress. As

the force drew near with Hiro at its head, the gates slid open and Liz, commander of the fortress, emerged. Cerberus trotted along at her side.

“Welcome back!” She ran up to them, grinning from ear to ear.

Hiro swung himself down from the carriage and gave Cerberus a welcoming scratch before turning to Liz. “You were waiting for us?”

“Obviously.” She pouted. “You were taking so long!”

Hiro smiled awkwardly. “We’re back ahead of schedule.”

“That’s still too long.”

They passed side by side through the gate and into the courtyard.

“Everything went smoothly on my end. How about you?”

Liz set a finger to her lips. “They surrendered easily enough. That’s why I got back before you. Which I guess makes me the winner!” She puffed out her chest with pride.

“I suppose it does. So? How did you do it?”

“I disguised myself as a peasant girl. The bandits couldn’t help themselves. They came right out to strip me of my things.”

They must have been astonished to find a girl as pretty as Liz in a backwater province like Gurinda. Blinded by her charms, they had blundered straight into a trap.

“That must have been a nasty surprise,” Hiro remarked.

“You’re telling me! It wasn’t even a good fight. They weren’t very strong.” Liz stomped in dissatisfaction. She sounded frustrated.

Garda approached from behind Hiro’s back. “If you still long for battle, I will gladly be your sparring partner.”

Liz looked at Garda with disdain. “Oh, really? Well, you’d better be prepared for a bruise or three. I’ll warn you, I’m in good form today.”

Garda grinned. “I’ll try not to hurt you too badly, little lady.”

“Bold words. I hope you don’t regret them.”

Sparks crackled between the pair. Hiro, caught in the middle, gave an exasperated sigh. “Try not to kill each other, all right?”

Liz and Garda’s sparring record sat at five apiece. With her Spiritblade’s blessing, Liz had made short work of the zlosta at first, but his battle experience was nothing to sniff at. Over time, he had learned to counter Liz’s instinctual style of fighting and evened the score. Liz, in turn, was now aware of her shortcomings and working to overcome them. Soon she would surmount the wall in front of her and climb to greater heights. Hiro watched her progress with great anticipation.

As the trio passed into the courtyard, an unmistakable sigh of relief rose from the soldiers behind them.

“Let their guard down at the last moment, will they?” Garda growled, falling behind. The soldiers instantly straightened as he stepped back into their midst.

At that moment, Drix flew out of the central tower. “I am relieved to see you safely returned, Lord Hiro,” he proclaimed with impeccable courtesy. He fell to one knee, his eyes turning to Liz. “Lady Celia Estrella, I trust that you have passed on what I gave you?”

Liz cocked her head. “Passed on what?”

Drix’s jaw clenched just a little. “My lady, surely you recall... That is to say... The letter?”

“Oh! That! Hold on, I’ve got it here.” Liz’s eyes widened as she remembered. She held out a crumpled sheet of paper.

A sense of déjà vu nagged at Hiro as he took it. “What happened to it? It’s a mess.”

Liz beamed. “It’s from Father.”

The blood drained from Drix’s face at the sight of the crumpled letter. The man should have known better than to trust Liz with an important document, but Hiro still felt a twinge of sympathy. Personally, he didn’t care much about the treatment of the letter—he could more or less guess what it said—but in deference to Drix, who looked to be on the point of tears, he decided to open and read it immediately. Beneath the ornamental prose lay a simple instruction.

“It says we’re to come to the capital. His Majesty wants to reward us for our achievements in Lichtein.”

The words seemed to breathe new life into Drix. He stood, brushing the dust from his knees. “Such an honor! I will prepare for our departure forthwith.”

Hiro nodded. “See that we are ready to leave by tomorrow.”

Their triumphant return to the capital would require a great deal of preparation. They would have to decide how many soldiers to bring and calculate the provisions needed, as well as write ahead to reassure any nobles along their path of their peaceable intentions.

“We’ll bring five thousand men. Can you handle the logistics?”

They would take the well-maintained imperial roads, but bringing too many soldiers would slow their march to the crawl. Considering the need to maintain a presence in Berg Fortress on top of that, any more than five thousand would be foolish.

“I shall attend to it forthwith, Your Highness. Is there anything else?”

“I will summarize the details for you. Come by my chambers later.”

“Of course, Your Highness. By your leave.” Drix turned and walked away, barking orders to his subordinates as he went.

Hiro turned back to Liz. “You should probably pick out a few dresses.”

“Why? Do you want them?”

Why was that her first assumption? For a moment, Hiro couldn’t speak from shock. Come to think of it, however, Liz had never attended a banquet in her honor. That was why she had reacted so oddly. It was not difficult to imagine the treatment she had received throughout her life from the nobility. Anger started to boil in his chest, but he forced it back down.

“They’re not for me,” he said, putting on a fond smile. “They’re for you.”

When the banquet was inevitably held at the capital, Liz would be the star of the show. Hiro explained as much on the way back to his quarters, but the idea seemed to confuse her.

“But I hardly did anything,” she said. “It was all you.”

“That’s not true. You did an excellent job as commander. All I did was advise you. We won because the soldiers believed in you.”

Thanks to the connections Liz had forged with the officers, they had been able to proceed with their plans without their coup interfering with the troops’ performance. Hiro had merely provided a strategy. She had made the army capable of winning.

“That’s a lesson for you,” Hiro said. “The better you do your job, the more invisible your contributions become.”

“But how will anyone recognize my contributions if they’re invisible?”

“They won’t at the time. But once the dust has settled and the reports are filed, it’ll be clear who led the Fourth Legion to victory. And even if the reports are destroyed, the soldiers will vouch for you. There’s no sealing an entire army’s mouths.”

Hiro stopped. They had reached his chamber. He stepped inside, took a seat at his writing desk, and pulled out a pen and paper.

Liz dove onto the bed and wrapped her arms around one of the pillows. “Me, wearing a dress... I’d look *awful*. Can’t I just bring my uniform?”

“I think you should pack one or two just in case.”

“Hmm... I’m sure my sister gave me a few. Maybe I have them somewhere.”

That reminded Hiro of the need to seek Rosa’s help. He would have to find a suitable offering for the emperor, for one, but he also wanted to make the Fourth Legion’s arrival in the capital as grand an affair as possible, and she would know exactly how. He resolved to write to her immediately.

For a while, the room was silent but for the scratching of pen on paper. As the minutes swam lazily by, there came a sudden knock at the door.

Hiro raised his head. “Come in.”

“Your Highness.” Drix entered and bowed, then approached the desk and set down a sheaf of documents. “I have finalized the allocation of provisions. The relevant papers are here. They only await your signature.”

Hiro scanned through the documents and signed them. Then he slipped Rosa's letter into a white envelope, dripped wax onto it, and affixed his seal. Finally, he placed the envelope on top of the pile of papers and handed them back to Drix.

Drix's eyebrows pulled together dubiously. "And to whom would you have this sent?"

"House Kelheit."

Something briefly flashed in Drix's eyes, but then it was gone. In a moment, he had regained his composure and was scratching his head in bemusement as he regarded Hiro with a searching gaze. "I am surprised, I must confess. I had forgotten that you were acquainted with them."

"We had the opportunity to speak last time I was in the capital. I've been meaning to invite them to join us as a token of appreciation. Our victory wouldn't have been possible without them, after all." Hiro's answer was honest. He had no reason to hide the truth.

"Well, I think that sounds like a splendid idea. I will dispatch our fastest horse."

"Please."

As Hiro watched Drix leave, it struck him that Liz was unusually quiet. He looked to the bed to find her blithely asleep, still clutching his pillow. With an affectionate smile, he got up and draped a blanket over her shoulders.

"I suppose we can pick out dresses tomorrow."

They would take three thousand of the Fourth Legion and two thousand of the Crow Legion, Hiro's private force, to the capital. Tris, Garda, and the other aides would all accompany them. Kiork would take charge of Berg Fortress until they returned.

"I think that's everything. I should probably turn in too."

Stifling a yawn, he cast a glance at the happily dozing Liz and set about thinking where else he could sleep for the night.

The fifteenth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1023

The morning mist had cleared and the sun hung high overhead. A cool breeze blew through the town of Linkus as a two-horse carriage raced through the lunchtime bustle of the high street. Inside were Hiro, Liz, and Margrave Rugen Kiork von Gurinda, Liz's uncle.

"Hm?"

Gazing through the window, it struck Hiro that the town outside had changed. The markets had possessed no less energy when he first arrived, but there were more stalls now, and far more people.

Kiork noticed his look of surprise. "The news that you took charge of Berg Fortress spread like wildfire. Your presence made the southern territories a more desirable destination for merchants, and others followed." He sounded sincerely pleased.

Hiro rubbed his neck a little bashfully. Just then, Liz leaned against him to look out of the window.

"This town used to be empty," she said. "You'd see one or two stalls out there on a good day. It's incredible how it's grown. Isn't that right, Uncle?"

"Quite. My house has safeguarded this town since my grandfather's day, but I've never seen it so busy. With Sunspear so close, not even merchants from the duchy deigned to stop by."

Sunspear was one of the largest cities in the southern territories, and a stronghold of House Muzuk. One of the five great houses, House Muzuk had not declared support for any of the imperial heirs. For the time being, it seemed content to watch how events unfolded. The head was young, Hiro had heard, but gifted, and surrounded by a bevy of capable advisors.

"Well, those days are past now that Hiro's here!" Liz exclaimed with pride. "Before long, you'll have your very own Sunspear right here in Linkus!"

Kiork smiled fondly at his niece. "Right you are, my dear; although only if I play my part. Rest assured, I will work no less hard in your absence."

That, in fact, was why Hiro and Liz were there. They had come to ask Kiork to

manage Berg Fortress during their sojourn to the capital. The margrave had agreed to the request with his typical good cheer, before insisting on seeing them off to where their troops waited on the outskirts of town.

“You shouldn’t have anything to worry about,” Hiro said. “The duchy won’t exactly be eager to start another war, and the area around the fortress has gotten a lot more peaceful lately. Hopefully, there won’t be much to do.”

“He’s right, you know. Don’t overwork yourself just for the sake of it. You’re not as young as you used to be.”

Kiork’s face fell, his enthusiasm dampened from both sides. “Am I truly so unreliable?”

“No, that’s not what I...”

With Liz twisting Hiro’s words in an unintended direction, the conversation had taken an awkward turn.

Hiro racked his brains for a way to ease the tension, but he needn’t have bothered. Liz sprang from her seat with a cry and rapped on the front window.

“Stop the carriage! Hurry!”

The carriage screeched to a halt. For a moment, Hiro’s body seemed weightless. By the time he collected himself, Liz had already grabbed his arm and was halfway through the door.

“Liz? What’s happening?”

“Just shush and come with me!”

She dragged a confused Hiro to a stall selling engraved accessories. Bracelets and rings lay out for sale at reasonable prices.

“Remember how you promised you’d get me an apology gift?”

Hiro did vaguely recall making a promise to that effect during the final battle in Lichtein.

“I guess I did...”

“Then buy me this. I saw it when I passed through earlier. Isn’t it lovely?”

Liz picked up a silver bangle. With its intricate detailing, it was one of the

pricier pieces on the table. She seemed to notice Hiro staring at the label.

“It’s all right if it’s too much,” she said, her voice low and hesitant. “I’ll be happy with something else.”

For all that she sounded embarrassed to have asked, the price wasn’t especially unreasonable. Hiro’s reservations weren’t about the money; if anything, he was worried about whether he could give her something so cheap. A single jewel could easily buy ten such bracelets. It would look a little out of place on a princess’s wrist.

“No, it’s fine. I’m just wondering...is this really what you want?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Wouldn’t something else suit you better? How about this ring? Or this necklace?”

Hiro pointed out a couple of more expensive-looking pieces, but Liz shook her head.

“No. I want this one.”

She cradled it so affectionately, Hiro couldn’t bring himself to argue further. He flagged down the merchant and purchased the bangle, then asked for three more items to be added to the bag.

“Hm?” Liz looked at him quizzically. “What else did you get?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out. Come on, let’s head back to Kiork.”

The surrounding townsfolk had taken note of Liz’s presence. She hadn’t bothered to disguise herself, so she was beginning to draw a crowd.

“Time to make a run for it,” she exclaimed, already dashing for the carriage. “This way!”

“You can’t just run off without me— Oh, never mind.”

The crowd was hardly violent, just curious. Hiro set off after Liz at a more sedate pace, but a voice from behind his back brought him to a stop.

“A bracelet, eh? I see, I see.”

He turned to see Kiork, whom he thought they had left in the carriage.

“How long have you been here?”

“Me? Oh, I followed you out. Anyway, I’m delighted to see that your search was successful. Shall we make our way back?”

The man clapped Hiro on the shoulder and set off, but he looked back a few steps later with a knowing grin. “Perhaps you aren’t aware, but there’s a custom in the Mark. When giving gifts to someone dear to them, one always begins with a bracelet.”

“Really?”

“The practice is a little old-fashioned nowadays, but Liz’s mother was fond of it. I daresay it means a lot to her daughter to keep it alive.”

“I see. But why a bracelet?”

“Well, anything ring-shaped will do. Rings symbolize the forging of a bond, you see. But that bracelet is special—it’s engraved with a wisteria flower. There, my boy, is your answer.”

“I’m sorry,” Hiro said. “I didn’t quite catch that last bit.” The crowd had started to murmur, and Kiork’s whisper had gotten lost in the noise.

“Perhaps that’s for the best. I suppose it wasn’t my place to mention it.”

Hiro sighed. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing you need concern yourself with. Come, my niece is waiting. If this crowd grows any larger, you’ll be late to the capital.”

At Kiork’s urging, Hiro set off once more. He returned to the carriage bemused and devoid of answers.

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The twentieth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1023

Hören, in the east of the central territories

After waving goodbye to Kiork, Hiro and his company set out for the roads east of the Schein High Road. There, they would meet the widowed countess of House Kelheit.

After they had been traveling long enough to grow accustomed to the rumble of the carriage, Liz turned to Hiro.

“It’s been so long since I last saw my sister. We write, but it just isn’t the same.”

“Her whole face lit up when she talked about you, you know.”

“Really? That’s good to hear. She’s always had a soft spot for me, you know. Maybe it’s because she was my tutor.”

It was apparently tradition for the women of the royal family to take charge of their younger sisters’ education for a time. Not so for the men, out of concern for conflict over the imperial succession. The custom meant that the imperial princesses were on better terms with one another than the princes. Still, the first princess was sickly and lived a life of seclusion in a countryside temple, while the second had passed away at a young age, so Liz had never met her. The fourth and fifth princesses—twins—were closer to Liz’s age and had been friendly with her for a time, but as they shared a mother with Third Prince Brutahl, they had grown distant after she was chosen by Lævateinn.

“So Rosa is the only one I still write to,” Liz concluded a little sadly.

Lævateinn’s favor had gained her little and cost her much. Still, if she made wise choices in the weeks and months to come, she would find chances to recover what she had lost—and the first was this, her reunion with her sister. Hiro hoped that it would be one of many such opportunities.

“You must be looking forward to seeing her,” he said. “Only a little while longer and you’ll be able to catch up on everything you couldn’t put in your letters.”

“I have so much to tell her.” Liz beamed. “I could talk for days!”

“That’s good to hear. I’m sure she feels the same.”

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than the carriage came to a halt. Knuckles rapped on the window, and Hiro looked up to see Drix staring through the glass.

“An emissary has arrived from House Kelheit, Your Highness. They request

permission to join our company.”

“That must be my sister! Of course they have permission. Tell them right away!”

“At once, Your Highness.” Drix’s head receded.

Liz flung the window open. “Look, Hiro!” she exclaimed. “Look at all the banners!”

Hiro followed her gaze. Ahead, another road met theirs. Arrayed along it was a horde of soldiers in varying shades of eastern noble livery. House Kelheit stood at their fore.

Hiro and Liz disembarked to wait for Rosa at the junction. A small detachment of a hundred riders split off from the eastern force and approached. In the lead rode the woman they had been waiting for: Myste Caliard Rosa von Kelheit, the young acting head of House Kelheit whose heroic efforts had kept the great house together after her late husband’s passing. Clad in an indigo uniform and riding a white horse, she looked more gallant than demure, but that did nothing to dim her beauty, only adding a sultry edge that brought out the already-uncommon loveliness of her face.

“Liz!” Rosa called out. “It’s been far too long!” She swung down from her horse and wrapped her little sister in an embrace. “You’ve been keeping well, I hope? And in good health? You always sounded in high spirits, but quill strokes tell so little.”

“I’m doing just fine.” Liz smiled. “And I’m glad you are too.”

They held one another close for a moment, then stepped apart.

Rosa’s gaze moved to Hiro. “And quite the same to you. You didn’t miss me too much, I hope?”

Her tackle caught him full-force, squashing his head into her ample chest. It occurred to him to dodge, though it happened in the blink of an eye, but he decided it was better not to ruin the mood. He lifted his arms and resigned himself to Rosa’s embrace.

She sniffed his neck. “And you don’t stink either. Most Grantzian men I can

smell from a sel away, but I don't even notice you!"

Hiro smiled sheepishly. "People do say Japanese people smell less." He was too accustomed to his own odor to tell one way or the other, and besides, whatever scent there may have been was overpowered by Rosa's own. The mixture of her perfume and natural sensuality was making his head spin.

"But I think that's quite enough of the pleasantries, don't you?" Having gotten her fill, Rosa drew away and placed her hands on her hips. Her face turned serious. "We have much to discuss. Shall we retire?"

She gestured to a carriage behind her. Hiro and Liz nodded in assent and followed.

The three took their seats inside. Rosa was the first to speak. "Now, there's no cause for alarm, but I've had word that the northern nobles are conducting large-scale military exercises."

The Grantzian Empire was divided into northern, western, eastern, southern, and central regions, generally referred to as "the five territories." All five ultimately fell under the emperor's dominion, but their day-to-day management was entrusted to five powerful noble families called the great houses.

"So House Scharm is making moves?"

"No. The power behind them. The second prince."

The prince's mother was a lady of House Scharm, which secured him the support of the northern nobles. He rarely appeared in public, however, citing his sickly constitution, and generally seemed uninterested in competing for the throne. For him to even visit the central territories was a rare enough event.

"Strange. I wonder why he's changed tactics."

"Who knows? Whatever he's after, it can't be glory. Our only northern border is with Lebering. His Majesty makes no secret of his intent to unify Soleil, but even that wouldn't excuse attacking a longtime ally."

So what did the second prince want, and why was he suddenly going after it now? There was something there, Hiro could tell, but he knew too little about

the man to speculate.

All I can do for now is watch and wait. He shook his head to clear his mind.

At that moment, Liz clapped her hands together. “Oh, that’s right! Speaking of Lebering, isn’t the princess’s coming-of-age ceremony supposed to be soon?”

The Kingdom of Lebering was known colloquially as the land of the zlostas. One thousand years ago, the fiendkin had threatened to conquer the entire continent before the humans stood up to resist their oppression. The other peoples followed suit and a bloody war ensued. When the dust settled, the zlostas had been defeated.

While most zlostas had been chased from Soleil to the southern archipelago of Ambition, a few had chosen to stay and save their comrades who were too slow to flee. These zlostas founded the Kingdom of Lebering in the north. A thousand years of mingling with other peoples had thinned their offspring’s blood, however, to the point where they were almost human. Children born in the kingdom nowadays bore only the barest traces of mana. Even the royal line was no longer pure.

“So it is. She’s lovely to look at, I hear. They call her the Vernesse—the Princess of Amethyst—and they say her skin’s as white as the snow she rules. It’s enough to make a woman jealous.” Rosa shot Hiro a meaningful look. “That must pique your interest, I’m sure. The goodness-knows-how-many-greats granddaughter of one of Mars’s closest allies, and a beauty at that.”

One thousand years ago, when Hiro was still called the Hero King, he had commanded five lieutenants known as the Black Hand. One of them was Lox van Lebering, a kindhearted zlostas who had sided with the humans against his own kind. Hiro wouldn’t have minded learning more about the nation his old friend had founded, but a glance at Liz’s pout told him that the subject of this princess was best left unbroached.

With a twinkle in her eye and a change of topic, Rosa came to his rescue. “Let’s leave the matter of the north for a moment. I want to discuss the central territories.”

“Something’s happened, then?”

“I expected the undeclared nobles to show some spine, is what happened. A misjudgment on my part. They cowered like beaten dogs as soon as House Krone showed the rod. The more powerful among them are still bold enough to bark, but they can’t work together, and none would dare bite alone.” Rosa expelled a disappointed sigh. “By the time I bring all of the eastern nobles in line, House Krone’s position will be more secure than ever. I have no intention of sitting on my hands in the meantime, of course, but the fact is that there’s little to be done.”

House Kelheit might control the east, but even its association with Hiro wasn’t enough to secure the loyalty of every noble house in its territory. They could seek help elsewhere in the meantime, but from whom? The western nobles were too preoccupied with putting down the Faerzen Resistance to intervene in central politics; the south seemed content to watch and wait, their goals inscrutable; and at this critical juncture, the north was conducting war games. With no one to stop them, House Krone was slowly but steadily regaining its hold over the central territories.

“Our next move is already in motion,” Hiro said. “There’s a reason our route takes us through Viscount von Wirst’s land.”

Recognition flashed in Rosa’s eyes. “Ah, yes. It’s his mansion we’re lodging at tonight, is it not?”

“Viscount Hans von Wirst, to use his full title. I dug into him a little. He has one city and three towns to his name, and he levies heavy taxes on all of them. Seeing as we’re passing through, I thought I might appeal to him to change his ways.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Liz said hesitantly, “but will he agree?”

Rosa waved a dismissive hand. “Of course he won’t. The central territories might be coming under strain, but House Krone still holds all the power. Although a well-placed crack in their foundations could easily change that.”

“And Viscount von Wirst is that crack. Before I left Berg Fortress, I wrote to all the central nobles and everybody of note in the area. *Someone* will do *something*—it’s just a question of who and what.”

Liz furrowed her brow in thought. “So...you’re trying to make them get in

each other's way?"

Hiro turned to Liz, his eyes narrowing. Rosa, too, looked at her little sister curiously. Liz shrank back as she felt the air in the carriage change.

"Sorry. That was probably a stupid thing to say."

Hiro hurriedly interrupted her apology with a shake of his head. "No, you're exactly right. We're trying to pit them against each other."

His letters had detailed his plans to stay with Viscount von Wirst. Reading that, the central nobles would suspect the viscount planned to switch allegiances, and odds were high that one of them would attempt to prevent it. The undeclared nobles might also try to intervene, or even the rulers of the other territories. That was the plan, at least, but Hiro hadn't expected Liz to cotton on to it.

"Look at you, a little tactician! You've made your big sister proud!"

"Wait, what are you—? Oomph!"

Hiro's smile turned a little strained as Liz vanished into Rosa's embrace.

"Anyway, that's the plan," he said. "We'll use the aristocracy's self-interest against them and bring the central nobles down."

Liz thrust her sister away and turned back to Hiro. "Are you sure this will work? I mean, if I could see through it, I bet other people can too."

"I'm sure a few of them will realize what the letter is really for. But many won't. Especially the kind of corrupt nobles who only care about themselves."

Even if nobody responded to his prodding, Hiro had a backup plan in place. This venture would produce something, no matter what.

"Look lively now. We're coming up on Sieg."

Hiro cast his gaze outside the window, where Viscount von Wirst's hometown had appeared on the horizon.

Sieg was a modestly sized city that had sprung up after the establishment of the five territories. Close to Cladius, it had never known conflict, and so had expanded uninhibited by walls. The steady traffic of adventurers and merchants

bound for the capital enlivened its streets long after dark, and it had grown rich off its status as a satellite city.

Viscount von Wirst's mansion lay at the center of the circular sprawl. Hiro, Liz, Rosa, and their hundred guards disembarked to a grandiose fanfare played by a troupe of musicians on the second-floor balcony.

"Lord Hiro! And Lady Celia Estrella! What an honor, what an honor!"

A middle-aged man draped in jewelry stepped out to welcome them with outstretched arms. "Hans von Wirst, viscount of Sieg by the will of His Majesty the Emperor, at your service," he announced, sinking into a vassal's bow. An array of retainers—both male and female—stood around him, every one of them young and beautiful.

"Charmed, I'm sure." Liz barely acknowledged the man as she strode past him. Cerberus trotted at her heels; the two had reunited slightly earlier. She stopped and glanced back over her shoulder, one hand petting the wolf's head. "Could you see about fetching us dinner? And perhaps draw us baths?"

If Viscount von Wirst was offended by her haughty manner, he didn't show it. "But of course, Your Highness!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Rest assured, I have prepared a magnificent banquet for your enjoyment. If you might follow me?"

Rosa laid a hand on Hiro's shoulder as she watched the exchange. "He's a more patient man than I expected," she murmured. "I was certain he would take offense."

"He's no stranger to dealing with royalty. He's probably delighted to find her so easy to please."

What von Wirst truly thought of Liz, there was no way to tell, but men like him knew how to curry favor with power. His comely servants were likely less to please his own tastes and more to entice his guests.

"So? Do any of his girls catch your eye? Although I can't say any look half as pretty as me."

"No. None of them hold a candle to you." Hiro didn't have to lie. Rosa's claim might have sounded conceited, but that didn't make it any less true.

“Well, look who’s learned to speak his mind! Perhaps I’ll share your bed tonight.”

Hiro felt strangely certain that Liz would end up there too. He chuckled nervously. “I’ll think about it.”

Mind whirling with ways to escape his looming peril, he entered the mansion. Viscount von Wirst led their party through to a large dining hall, where sumptuous dishes lay on tables set with pristine tablecloths. Every chair was furnished with its own waiter. A more lavish welcome would have been hard to imagine.

“Come, sit, sit!” their host instructed. “Tonight you will dine upon the finest delicacies of the central territories! It would not do to let them get cold!”

The trio took their places, but Hiro immediately noticed that something felt off. “Wait, this can’t be right...”

He had taken a seat in the middle of the table, leaving the head for royalty, but Liz had sat down at his right-hand side. Moreover, Rosa had taken the place on his left.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Liz said.

“Nor do I. All is quite as it should be,” Rosa agreed.

“But...I mean...what about them?”

Viscount von Wirst’s attractive young retainers were evidently supposed to alternate with their guests, but Liz and Rosa had left them with nowhere to sit. They looked just as confused as Hiro felt. Their master seemed no less taken aback, but he only let it show for a fraction of a second before he dismissed them and sat down opposite the trio. Finally, Cerberus took Liz’s seat at the head of the table. Von Wirst’s smile grew a little more fixed at that, but as Liz’s pet, the wolf’s position was unchallengeable.

“Well, let us begin the night’s festivities,” their host announced with only the slightest quaver in his voice. “First, a toast to the Twelve Divines for guiding my two honored guests safely to my door, and to the Spirit King for bringing about this happy meeting of the royal family and my own house of Wirst...” With a wine glass in hand, he launched into a long-winded speech.

“All these words and not an ounce of sincerity,” Rosa whispered. “The Divines will turn a deaf ear if they know what’s good for them.”

“Rosa! That’s rude!” exclaimed Liz. “I do hope he wraps it up quickly, though...”

“You’re rather blunt yourself. Still, he should sober up soon enough.”

The trio turned their attention to their plates as their host droned on.

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The banquet passed without incident, its host’s verbosity notwithstanding, and proved an enjoyable meal. Once the festivities ended, von Wirst escorted his guests to their rooms. He then returned to his own quarters in high spirits, after which...

“Well, then, who’s sleeping where?”

“I don’t understand why you’re sleeping here at all!”

“Sorry, Liz, but you don’t have a leg to stand on here.”

Now Hiro was trapped between two arguing sisters.

“See? My darling agrees. After how long we’ve been apart, you and I must be together, and since we’re rising early, it only makes sense that he should join us.”

Hiro had, in fact, *not* said any of that, but Liz responded before he could interrupt. “Fine. I suppose you’ll want the window side?”

“But of course. I do love to sleep in the sight of the stars.”

Liz made a pensive noise. “Then I’ll take the door. That way, I’ll be the first to react if anything happens.”

“Which leaves my darling in the middle. I cannot say I object.”

“Sounds good to me!”

The sisters climbed onto their respective sides of the bed and turned to Hiro with expectant eyes.

“You know what? I’ve got something I need to do,” he said. “You two go

ahead and sleep. I'll join you later."

"Very well," Rosa yawned. "I'm not one to shirk a good night's rest."

It was easy to see where Liz got it from; both she and Rosa were fast asleep and snoring almost as soon as they hit the mattress. They were both tired from the journey, and the drink surely hadn't helped. Both of their bodies had decided to prioritize rest.

After checking that they were both sleeping soundly, Hiro slipped out of the room. Shadows clung to the corridor outside as he gazed unflinchingly into the gloom.

"What did you find?" he asked.

From within the darkness came the clank of metal. "A scoundrel of the lowest sort," a gravelly voice announced. "Would that taxes were the worst liberty he has taken with his people."

Garda's towering bulk emerged from the darkness. His expression was shadowed, but his voice made his disapproval clear.

"Interesting. So what foolishness is our host getting up to?" Before arriving in Sieg, Hiro had sent Garda ahead to get the lay of the land.

"He squeezes his people for their last coppers, then dresses his men as bandits and takes what little they have left."

Hiro's eyes narrowed. "Interesting. How did you come by that?"

"Some of his men were keeping watch at one of the villages we looked into. Things got messy, but we made them talk. Still, that alone won't be enough to tie von Wirst to their deeds."

"Then we'll drag them in front of him and see what he has to say. It's not exactly subtle, but it'll work."

"I imagine they'll deny ever knowing one another."

"I can think of ways to make them talk."

Hiro turned toward von Wirst's chambers but immediately froze. Something was wrong.

“Garda, take the rear.”

Before the words even left his mouth, he summoned Excalibur and sprang forward into the darkness. For a half-second there was silence, then a shower of sparks. Ringing steel echoed along the midnight corridor. Two blades briefly struggled against each other before one gave way with a clang, and something fell to the ground with an unpleasant smack. Hiro was not done, however, and Excalibur was a streak of white as he twisted around and slashed to his left.

“Aaagh!”

“You, I won’t kill so easily. I have some questions for you.”

A shaft of moonlight shone in through the window to bathe the corridor in silver, revealing the man pinned beneath Hiro’s boot. His left arm had been cloven clean from his shoulder. To his side, fresh blood spurted from a headless corpse.

“Skillfully done.” Garda approached, sounding impressed. “I felled one myself. It seems there were only the three.”

Hiro nodded. He lifted his boot and leaned down to stare into his captive’s face. “Tell me something worth knowing,” he said, “and I’ll make sure you don’t lose any more limbs.”

The assassin flinched at the chill in Hiro’s voice, but bared his teeth in a defiant smile. “Oh, Father, hear my prayer,” he intoned. “Curse the foolish with eternal torment. Oh, Father, hear my prayer. Bless your faithful with eternal rest!”

As the final syllable left his mouth, he let out a scream, and then his face erupted with blood. The strength left his limbs and he collapsed. A crimson pool spread out from his motionless body.

Hiro could only watch in astonishment. Before he could react, it was all over. He checked the assassin for signs of life, but the man was dead.

“These were no ordinary killers, were they?” he asked—not to Garda, but to Drix, who was standing in the dark depths of the corridor.

“No, they were not. They belong to an order known as Orcus. The House of

Blackest Death.” The man stepped closer. “A name that first finds serious mention in the history books three hundred years ago, during the greatest famine in imperial history. The aristocracy were rotten through, squeezing their people dry with taxes, warring with one another over the most trifling matters. And then, when it seemed things could get no worse, an assassin of Orcus claimed the emperor’s life. Such a thing has never happened before or since, you understand. And so their name rose to infamy across all of Soleil almost overnight.”

Drix rested his back against the wall and slumped into a crouch. Hiro’s eyes narrowed to see the sweat drenching his forehead.

“Are you hurt?”

“Grazes, nothing more. They will heal. I am sweating because I was running for my life.”

“So we weren’t their target, then. You were.”

“Indeed. I had the misfortune to stumble on them during my investigations. It seems we were interested in the same man. They attacked, and the rest was as you saw.” Drix tossed Hiro a twine-bound sheaf of papers. “Sales contracts from slave merchants, human trafficking records, and it seems the good viscount is also taking bribes. We’ll find more with some time to peruse, I have no doubt.”

That much evidence would easily be enough to twist Viscount von Wirst’s arm. Their plans were now well in motion. Hiro opened his mouth to thank Drix—and a shrill scream split the night.

“It can’t be!” Seized by a dreadful premonition, he made a snap decision and launched into a sprint. “Garda, with me! Drix, wake Rosa and Liz!”

As Hiro raced after the scream, a faint glow came into view. The door to von Wirst’s chambers was ajar. Light spilled through, illuminating the gloom.

He screeched to a stop. A servant cowered in front of the door, face white as a sheet.

“Damn. Too late...”

Hiro entered to see von Wirst’s mutilated corpse.

“They gouged out the eyes and destroyed the brain with a single strike. A curious technique.” Garda caught up, pausing to catch his breath. “Shall we send word to close the city? This was not the work of the three we slew.”

“We’d only be wasting our time. Sieg doesn’t have walls. They’ll slip through somehow.”

Hiro draped a sheet over von Wirst’s body. As he did, he noticed something lying beside the corpse—a headless clay figure. He picked it up and looked it over warily.

“What’s this now?” He turned to Garda. “Do you recognize it?”

The zlosta grunted. “Made by one of the man’s children, perhaps.”

“Viscount von Wirst doesn’t have children.”

And even if he had, the effigy was too eerily detailed to have been made by a child. As the pair stared at the curious object, a flurry of footsteps came from the corridor. Rosa appeared in the doorway along with an escort of soldiers and Drix.

“Darling!” Rosa cried. “Are you all right?!” She flung her arms around Hiro in a panic.

“I’m fine. There’s no need to be so worried.”

“Oh, but there is, if Orcus are involved! Drix told me everything.” She patted Hiro over, checking for injuries. As she did, her gaze caught the clay figure and lingered there a moment.

Hiro saw the object catch her notice and held it up. “Do you know what this is?”

“A doll made in the image of the Father they worship. Orcus love their customs, you see. Whenever they kill, they leave one of these behind as a mark of their work.”

So the doll was useless. Hiro sighed. He had suspected that the nobility might try to impede his plans but not that they might resort to such drastic means. What to do now? Von Wirst’s death had thrown his plans into disarray. By now, he should have been using Drix’s findings to purchase the viscount’s loyalty and

leverage him to bring down the central nobles. Instead, he had nothing to work with at all.

“I never expected them to kill the man.” Rosa sounded uncertain. “Now some other central noble will be given Sieg, and all our plans will have been for naught.”

Hiro laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right. We’ve still come out ahead. Drix made certain of that.”

The assassins had succeeded in killing von Wirst, but failed to hide his crimes.

“I never expected this would be easy. Besides, it hasn’t been a total wash. If they’re hiring Orcus, we know they’re taking this seriously. That’s useful information.”

Whoever had contracted Orcus wanted more than to cover their tracks, if they had avoided using their own homegrown assassins. They wanted to be certain that the killing succeeded and any evidence of wrongdoing was destroyed.

“Garda, Drix, I have orders for you.”

The two men came before Hiro and sank to one knee.

“Garda, ride for our encampment. Make the men ready to depart.”

“As you command,” Garda grunted. He rose, turned, and vanished down the corridor at a brisk pace.

“Drix, take an escort and ride ahead to the capital.” Hiro handed the man the sheaf of bound documents that listed the central nobles’ crimes. “Summarize the contents of this and deliver the report to Chancellor Graeci.”

Drix’s face took on a fresh intensity. “I will see it done. At the cost of my life if need be.” He, too, raced from the room, several soldiers at his side. Only Hiro, Rosa, and a few soldiers were left in the chamber.

“Where’s Liz?” Hiro asked.

“She took some men to guard the mansion,” Rosa replied. “She would have run to your side if she could, but she was adamant about doing her duty.”

At that very moment, Liz entered the room alongside Cerberus. “I’ve woken all the servants and gathered them in the great hall,” she reported. “And I’ve organized the men into squads of four and sent them to patrol the grounds. If anyone’s still lurking around, we’ll hear about it.”

“Good work,” Hiro said. “I’ve sent Garda to contact the encampment. We should have reinforcements soon.”

“Good. You look fine, anyway. Thank goodness.” Liz looked him up and down. Seeing that he was unhurt, she stepped up and embraced him, pouting. “You have no *idea* how much I wanted to come and help you.”

Hiro smiled fondly. “I could handle myself. It’s good that you held off.”

The alternative was to have neglected the safety of the servants to leap to his aid before even grasping the situation. He would have had to scold her for that.

“You really do think I’m stupid, don’t you?”

“That’s not true. You just act before you think sometimes, that’s all.”

“Hey! You don’t really think that, do you?!”

She had the education—as a member of the royal family, it would have been hard not to—and even Hiro couldn’t deny that she had the talent. In many ways, she was already the high general she had once dreamed of becoming.

“No. Sorry. I was just teasing.”

Liz puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. “Fine. I’ll let it go this time. So, what do we do now?”

“We leave Sieg in the care of its administrator and depart tomorrow morning. I’ll leave some people behind to keep an eye on things, but we should get some distance from the city before any rumors start to spread.”

If possible, Hiro would have preferred to leave one of Rosa’s nobles in control of von Wirst’s lands until a suitable replacement could be found, but that would risk provoking their central counterparts. Better to leave that decision to Chancellor Graeci.

“Anyway, you two should sleep,” he said to Liz and Rosa. “You’ve got a big day tomorrow. I’ll handle things here.”

“But...”

“Listen to him, Liz,” Rosa interrupted. “You have to get *some* sleep or your makeup will look dreadful tomorrow.”

Hiro nodded in agreement. “You’ll be parading through the streets of the capital. The last thing we want is for the people to see you looking sleep-deprived.”

He ushered the two sisters out. Then, at last, he was alone in the room.

“Orcus, huh?”

He lowered his gaze to his palm, where the small clay doll still lay.

Chapter 2: A New Mission

The blue sky stretched endlessly away. Beneath its vivid canopy, a host of horses and riders made their leisurely way along the Schein High Road, one of the arterial roads leading to the capital. Strapping soldiers marched in line, their armor glinting in the sun. The gleam of swords and shields swept across the land with the crunch of marching boots.

Standards of all colors rose above the soldiers' heads; a sun, a lily, a black dragon, a rose. There were easily a dozen great banners and more than thirty smaller ones. The sun, the lily, and the black dragon stood together above a gaudy four-horse carriage. Three people—and one wolf—sat within.

“Not long now to the capital,” Rosa observed as she stared out of the window. “I ought to have mentioned, I sent the lesser nobles ahead to wait for us.”

She crossed her arms, pushing up her breasts. Her military uniform emphasized her figure enough to draw any man's eye, but anyone foolish enough to take that as an invitation would meet with swift and merciless retaliation.

“I spared no expense. You will receive the most lavish welcome money can buy.”

Hiro grimaced. “Liz, maybe, but there's no need to throw any kind of party on my account.”

His position as the War God's heir made him enough of a celebrity as it was, but whispers of the One-Eyed Dragon were spreading with incredible speed. Stealing the limelight from Liz would defeat the purpose of their entrance. He sighed in exasperation.

Rosa cocked her head. “A strange thing to say, looking as you do.” She gestured at his person—not only to his black hair and eyes, but to his imperial uniform, with its outdated style, and his black overcoat with dragons entwined

along its shoulders. “You may as well have ‘Behold the War God’s heir!’ tattooed across your forehead.”

There was nothing Hiro could say to that. She was right. It did look as if he was trying to emphasize his status...or perhaps even like a cosplaying Mars fan.

“You’d draw far fewer stares without the Black Camellia,” Rosa suggested.

Hiro shook his head. The Black Camellia might earn him some funny looks, but it would take more than that to convince him to take her off. She might be willful, but her loyalty was absolute. She had saved his life countless times over the past thousand years and would no doubt save it countless more. There was only one answer he could give:

“That’s nonnegotiable.”

There was no trace of hesitation in his voice, but the Black Camellia’s collar still tightened protectively. Smiling wryly, he gave his lapel a reassuring pat. *Don’t worry. I won’t abandon you.* Only then did the garment slacken.

Just then, a thought struck him.

“Liz?”

Normally, Liz would have jumped into the conversation by that point, but she was strangely silent. Hiro looked to his side to see...

“...zzz...”

Liz was curled up on the seat beside him, snoring softly. With Cerberus for a pillow, she looked as content as he had ever seen her.

A half-suppressed snort issued from across the carriage. Hiro looked back at Rosa to see her gazing fondly at her sister.

“She must be exhausted. Not that I can blame her.”

A horde of nobles armed with kind regards had descended on Liz on the road from Sieg, and committing their names and faces to memory had taken a heavy toll. By the time she had finally emerged from the throng, she’d looked like she hadn’t slept in a week.

“It’ll only get worse from here,” Hiro remarked. “We’ll have an audience and a

banquet waiting once we reach the capital.”

Rosa nodded in agreement. “Indeed we will. All manner of nobles will approach you, hoping to use you for all manner of ends.”

Everybody harbored some kind of ambition, and nobles all the more so. Nobility conferred obligation. Subjects, lands—aristocrats owed responsibilities to many quarters, and they would readily exploit even the royal family to see them honored. Exposure would mean execution, of course, but entertaining notions that it would be death to speak was what it meant to walk in high society. They would not be so easily outfoxed.

“Look out for Liz,” Hiro said.

“And who will look out for you?”

Hiro shrugged. “I got the hang of this last time I was here, more or less.”

“Last time” was one thousand years ago, although Rosa didn’t know it. Still, it was true that he had experience. Manners and courtesies would have evolved since then, but he could navigate that.

“Anyway, she’s the one you’ll have to take care of.”

As a member of the royal family, Liz was surely no stranger to noble society. Still, the coming banquet would be a different beast entirely. Before, she was merely a princess. Tonight, she would be an imperial heir. Her words would be the pronouncements of a contender for the throne now, not a young girl’s idle chatter. She would have to choose them carefully or they would be turned against her in an instant.

Rosa nodded sagely. She seemed to have guessed what Hiro was thinking. “Then so I shall. But what of once the banquet is over?”

Hiro looked at her in confusion, unsure what she meant. Her tongue snaked out to moisten her lips. The motion was so lascivious, it almost seemed obscene.

“Let’s not play coy. What I mean is, how do you intend to explain to Liz that I spent the night in your chambers?”

“I don’t. Because we’re sleeping separately.”

“Really? You have no interest in me?” Rosa’s eyebrows rose in what looked like genuine surprise.

Hiro put a hand to his forehead and heaved a sigh. “I thought you said you needed some time.”

“And time has passed.” Rosa puffed out her chest for emphasis. “Now I am resolved.”

Hiro’s jaw tightened just a little. “Do you really not get embarrassed by...you know, all this? I wonder if you’re where Liz gets it from.”

While Rosa was overly forward about sexual matters, Liz was entirely ignorant, but that was causing its own problems. Hiro would have given anything to know what the Grantzian Empire was teaching its royal family.

“Hm?” Rosa cocked her head at the mention of her sister. For a moment, she seemed confused that Liz was even being brought up, before recognition sparked in her eyes and she looked away guiltily. “Ah. Yes. That may indeed be my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was the one who educated the fourth, fifth, and sixth princesses.”

Hiro nodded in acknowledgment. Liz had mentioned something to that effect on the road from Linkus.

“I found my little sisters more endearing when they were pure, so I substituted the truth for some fabrications of my own. Still, I could not care for them every hour of the day. Imagine my sorrow when they were appointed private tutors to supplement my lessons. It took all of my scheming to have the women removed.” Rosa paused and expelled a regretful sigh. “My, but I miss those days. It’s a shame they could not last. The fourth princess was the first to learn the truth. She told me to my face that she hated me and I haven’t seen her since. And the fifth princess never cared much for my lessons, so at some stage she found her own sources on the subject and discovered for herself what beasts men truly are.”

She turned to gaze wistfully out of the window.

“Liz was the only one who truly seemed to enjoy learning from me. I let myself get carried away and taught her all sorts of fanciful nonsense.”

She seemed to think she was making ordinary conversation, but hearing her story made it hard to take her side. Noticing that Hiro was looking at her oddly, she waved a flustered hand in front of her face.

“But worry not! I made certain to teach her caution. It wouldn’t do to have some man take advantage of her.”

Hiro didn’t do a good job of concealing his incredulity. “Liz? Caution? Are you sure?”

Rosa cocked her head. She looked from him to Liz, to him, to Liz, then clapped her hands in realization. “Ah. I see.”

She opened her mouth to elaborate...and was interrupted by a knock on the window. A soldier’s voice, not too loud, not too quiet, sounded through the interior of the carriage.

“We’re coming up on the capital, Your Highness.”

Rosa put a finger to her lips. *Another time*, the gesture seemed to say.

“Then we shall change transport,” she called back to the soldier. “Have the parade carriage brought from the rear.”

“At once, my lady.” The soldier retreated from the window, barking orders as he went.

Rosa slid the curtains shut. “I’ll get changed first. You wake Liz.”

Without hesitation, she undid the buttons on her military jacket and began to strip. The pale skin of her slender limbs met the morning air. She bared her breasts, cast the last of her clothing away, and was naked.

Hiro had to wonder why she needed to go so far as removing her underwear—among other things—but she didn’t appear to feel the least bit of shame in doing so. If anything, she seemed proud, as though she had absolute confidence in her body. She leaned over and opened the case that contained her dress.

Hiro sighed, although mostly out of exasperation rather than awe. He could make his excuses and flee outside, but then he would be the one on the

receiving end of the soldiers' disdain. No man in the world would run at the sight of his lover unclothed.

“Look if you like. I welcome it, even.” Rosa’s voice was seductive in its sweetness. “Although, as much as it pains me, you really should wake Liz.”



Hiro did his best to shrug dismissively. It would be a lie to say Rosa held no interest for him, but he had been staring into space rather than staring at her. Still, making that excuse would only be digging himself in deeper. His best move was to give up protesting. He looked to his side, where Liz was sleeping, only to find—

“You’re awake.”

A pair of crimson eyes stared unblinkingly back at him. He froze like a deer caught in the headlights. When did she wake up? How much did she see? He wanted to ask, but his mouth wouldn’t move.

Liz stretched out a hand toward his face. She gently brushed his eyepatch, then pointed a little lower.

“Hiro... You’re drooling.”

Hiro clapped a guilty hand to his chin.

*

Cladius, the imperial capital, was the most prosperous city in Soleil. Newcomers would first be overwhelmed by the towering walls ringing its confines. Next, they would pass within, to be astounded by the churning crowds thronging the central boulevard or the countless stalls lining the streets. Perhaps they would tremble beneath the gazes of the bronze-cast Twelve Divines who greeted new arrivals. When the sights made their head spin and they looked to the sky for relief, the imperial palace would come naturally into view. A thousand years old but none the weaker for it, the edifice looked out proudly over the city it ruled, instilling residents with solemnity and visitors with awe.

It was the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1023.

On ordinary days, a crowd churned along the central boulevard, but today it was nowhere to be seen. Soldiers formed living walls to block their passage. The people ended up forced to either side as a result, but there was not a discontented face among them. All of their eyes were trained on the front gate, their gazes pregnant with excitement and anticipation.

Hiro's company passed within the city to rousing cheers. A so-called parade carriage led the procession, pulled by two white horses. Roofless and windowless, with only a handrail for safety, its ornamentation was plain for a royal vehicle, and with good reason: the carriage was not the star of the show. Its understated design emphasized the radiance of its riders, making them shine all the brighter.

Three figures sat in the carriage bed, waving to the crowd: Liz, in a red dress; Rosa, in a black dress; and Hiro, sandwiched between them.

This is a good turnout. The crowd might even be larger than last time.

Both sides of the boulevard were crammed with men and women of all ages. There was not a gap in sight. The spectators had to raise their hands above their heads to clap.

"You're gorgeous, Lady Celia Estrella!" came a shout.

"Thank you!" Liz cried back.

Most astonishing of all was Liz's popularity; her name was the one that the crowd roared the loudest. Hiro was next. Rosa's following seemed mostly male, but their fervor more than made up for their smaller number. Her widow's wiles were inviting some goggle-eyed looks from the men of the city.

"Look at their slack-jawed faces. They can't tear their eyes away!" Rosa's smile never faltered, but the words she spoke were fit for a villainess.

"Don't be so rude." Liz's eyes flashed as she rounded on her sister. "They're here for us, you know!"

Rosa gave a chastened shrug, like a child caught in some mischief. "Point taken. I'll be more careful."

Each of the sisters had one arm piled high with presents from the people—vetted, naturally, by the guards. The majority of the gifts were bouquets, but there were a few boxes of various sizes too, most likely containing jewelry. Judging by the letters affixed to the latter, some nobles and merchants had found their way into the crowd.

As for Hiro...

“Another one for your collection.” Rosa grinned as she handed him another bouquet.

Hiro grimaced. There was nowhere left to put it. The space around him was filled with bouquets in a spectrum of colors—yellow, blue, purple, white. All of them, however, were smeared with mud or missing petals, the kind of flowers that were picked from a roadside rather than bought from a stall.

“A gift from the future citizens of the empire.” There might have been a hint of jealousy in Rosa’s voice. “Keep them close.”

Hiro, in defiance of all expectations, had proven incredibly popular among children. The flowers around him had all been given by tiny hands. He scratched his cheek in embarrassment.

Liz turned to him, beaming. “I’m giving you a run for your money!”

On her head was a crown of flowers, presumably a child’s handiwork. Hiro couldn’t help but smile to see her competitive streak rear its head.

As he turned back to the crowd, he spotted a girl within the heaving mass of bodies. She was dressed in grimy garments and carried a red flower in her hands. Her nervous eyes glanced up at him hesitantly. Every so often, she would try to step closer to the parade, but the human wall in front of her pushed her back every time.

“Stop the carriage!” Hiro commanded the coachman. Liz gave him an odd look, but he ignored her. His black garb fluttered in the wind as he grasped the rear handrail and vaulted down to the street.

A hubbub went up from the commonfolk. Some glared with clear disapproval. Hiro thrust his arm out sideways in a commanding gesture, and they fell silent as a millpond. He had hushed their mouths in an instant, not with magic or some power of the spirits, but with sheer charisma.

A cool breeze blew down the boulevard, ruffling his hair and caressing the eyepatch obscuring half of his face. One could have heard a pin drop. As the gust departed, the guards holding back the crowd realized what had happened and fell in around him.

“Your Highness, if you would return to the carriage—”

Hiro held up a hand to silence the man before he could finish. He took a step toward the people.

“Might I ask you to stand aside?”

His voice carried an authority that brooked no disobedience. One person shuffled out of his way, then another, and another. In short order, a gap appeared in the crowd, just wide enough for an adult to pass. At the other end stood the girl in rags, an expression of confusion on her face.

Hiro offered her a reassuring smile before crouching down and waving her closer. She tottered toward him with uncertain steps.

He looked deep into her eyes. “That’s a beautiful flower you have there,” he said. “Would you let me have it?”

For a moment she was silent, and then...

“P-Please!”

She thrust the flower at him, her face breaking into a broad smile. Hiro took the blossom, rose to his feet, and patted her head.

“Thank you.”

The girl spun around, perhaps hiding her embarrassment, and dashed off down an alleyway. Once she was out of sight, he climbed back into the carriage and resettled himself in his seat. For a beat, there was silence, and then the crowd erupted with deafening cheers.

Commonfolk, nobles, royalty—whatever their standing, all people were born equal. That was a simple truth but one that all too often went forgotten. When royals were revered as gods, it was easy to convince oneself that they lived in different worlds. Yet here, the fourth prince had stooped to notice a girl from the slums that even the commonfolk had passed over. More, he had taken her mud-smeared flower, thanked her for her gift, and patted her head in affection. Acts of such intrinsic beauty were the province of stories, not reality. It was no surprise that the people were elated to have seen such a tale unfold in real life.

Hiro raised a hand in acknowledgment. The cheers roared even louder.

As the parade carriage set off once more, Rosa turned to him with a sly smile.

“Consider me impressed. You’ve quite the talent for this.”

Her voice oozed affection. She wrapped her hands around herself, as though trying to restrain an urge to throw them around him then and there. Hiro held up a bouquet of flowers in defense. As he did, he noticed Liz’s gaze lingering on the red flower in his hand.

“Hmm... Is that...?”

“Liz? What’s wrong?”

“I know this flower. It’s called an anat. They only bloom in certain places, so they’re really rare.” She cocked her head, muttering in thought. “But... How strange. It’s—”

The roar of the crowd cut off the end of her sentence. Hiro opened his mouth to ask her to repeat herself, but then he shut it again. The palace gate had come into view.

In the corner of his eye, Rosa began readying herself for their arrival. “Your audience with His Majesty will be in the evening, I expect,” she whispered, “followed shortly by a celebratory banquet.”

Hiro nodded in acknowledgment and looked up at the sky. The sun was still high. There would be at least an hour before it set. What to do in the meantime?

“Nnn...”

A pained groan issued from Liz. He glanced sideways to see apprehension spreading across her sculpted features. Perhaps the sight of the palace was bringing back unpleasant memories of her demotion to the Gurinda Mark. This time, she had her sister with her, so there should have been nothing to fear, but it was only human to worry.

Hiro laid a hand on her shoulder. “I know what you’re thinking, but that won’t happen. If anything, try not to be too surprised when things go the other way.”

Liz frowned. She didn’t seem to understand what he meant.

He grinned. “Don’t worry. You’ll see.”

As the whisper left his mouth, the austere palace gate swung open. A crowd

waited to greet them on the other side: palace officials, judging by their uniform. The elderly man at their head stepped forward. Hiro recognized him as Byzan Graeci von Scharm, chancellor of the empire. Between his stern visage and the silver-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, he gave off a frosty air.

“Lord Hiro Schwartz,” he pronounced. “I have awaited your return with the greatest anticipation.”

“Thank you for taking the time to welcome us,” Hiro replied. “I have no doubt that you’re busy.” He disembarked the carriage and offered a hand to the chancellor.

“My work is of little consequence, I assure you. The palace is sustained by the work of far more exceptional individuals than myself.” Graeci accepted the handshake, then he turned to Liz with a broad smile. “Lady Celia Estrella. I have heard rumors of your exploits. You have grown a little taller, if my eyes do not deceive me?”

“Only a little,” Liz remarked. “I see you still have your beard.”

“The one that you told me I ought to cut ‘because it looks silly’? Having cultivated it thus far, I thought it would be a shame not to go a little further. Alas, it seems I was not made for growing beards.” Graeci stroked his chin mournfully.

Hiro hadn’t realized that so much effort had gone into the sparse beard—he had assumed the man had simply been too busy to shave. At least two or three months must have passed since Liz had made her comment. If that was all Graeci had to show for himself after such a length of time, he would do better to shave the whole thing off.

Hiro wondered whether or not to say something. After wavering back and forth on the matter, the words that came out were: “So, is the audience still going ahead as planned?” Sometimes, he decided, people were better left to their own devices.

“It is,” Graeci replied. “It will be held once night falls, perhaps an hour from now. Until then, you may do as you wish.”

“I may just take you up on that.”

“I will dispatch a messenger to alert you once the time comes.” With a polite bow, the chancellor turned and escorted his flock of officials back within the palace confines.

As soon as they were out of sight, Liz grabbed hold of Hiro’s arm. “Come on, let’s go into town!”

“Sure. I was just thinking the same...”

Hiro trailed off as something behind him caught his attention. He turned around to see a group of soldiers working to unload a succession of large crates from the carriage.

Rosa stood in the resulting cloud of dust, issuing directions. “Do be careful,” she chastised the men as he watched. “Those are gifts for His Majesty you’re handling.”

Liz leaned in curiously. “Oh, I meant to ask. What’s that?”

She pointed to a small crate that stood on its own, a short distance from the rest: an item brought by Hiro.

He smiled mischievously. “You’ll see once we get to town.”

“Can’t you just tell me?”

“That would spoil the surprise.”

Liz pouted. “Does that *really* matter?”

Uncertainty flooded Hiro’s chest. What if she didn’t like it? “Maybe,” he said hesitantly.

Liz released his arm and peered into his eyes. “Really. Then I expect to be impressed, on pain of Lævateinn!”

Before he could ask what *that* meant, she was flouncing toward Rosa. Halfway there, she looked back over her shoulder. “My sister can’t do all this on her own! Come and help before you earn yourself a telling-off!”

With a shrug, Hiro tore his eyes away and gazed out over the capital. Below the palace hill sprawled the buildings of the town, vibrant and colorful.

After emptying the carriage, Hiro and Liz left Rosa in charge of the unloaded cargo and set out for the spirit temple in the eastern quarter. Much like the last time Hiro had visited that side of the city, the streets were filled with adventurers and sellswords. They stepped into an alley mouth between a guard post and an inn and proceeded along a gloomy passage. At last, they emerged into the wooded clearing. The spirit temple lay there as if to greet them, its white stone shining in the sun's rays. Children chased each other around the garden, engrossed in a game.

"Oh, it's lovely!" Liz gasped. "And so green!"

"Have you never been here?" Hiro asked.

A guilty look came over her face. "I tried to sneak out of the palace every chance I got, but Rosa had a watchful eye. And this part of the city wasn't always so peaceful. I never could have made it here on my own." She flung herself down on the grass and rolled onto her back. "I didn't have Lævateinn back then, you see."

"Well, I'm glad you can enjoy it now. I'm sure the children will love meeting you."

With that, Hiro turned his attention to the two figures behind him.

"Please tell me this is the place, chief. My legs can't take much more..."

Muninn slumped to the ground, his arms piled high. A dark-skinned man with a face full of scars, his burly physique concealed a laid-back personality and a tendency not to take anything too seriously. Still, his carefree manner hadn't stopped him from serving as Garda's lieutenant in the Liberation Army, and serving well; the man was a dab hand with a blade.

"Stop whining, you big oaf! You're embarrassing me in front of His Lordship!"

Fuming beside Muninn was his fiery younger sister, Huginn. She had been Mille's bodyguard and handmaiden in Lichtein. Skilled with a bow, she favored light armor for its freedom of movement, and her distinctive attire had been customized for maximum mobility. The result showed a lot of skin, which often made it hard not to stare, but with her toned musculature, her beauty was less the seductive kind and more a celebration of the physical form.

“You think it’s only you who’s tired?! I’m exhausted! I’m working hard! But you don’t catch me complaining, ’cause I’ve got manners! And then you bumble in! And ruin! Everything!”

“Hey, easy on the kicking! Where’s the sweet little sister I raised?”

“Die!”

Hiro couldn’t help but grin to see the siblings argue. It wasn’t their first spat and it certainly wouldn’t be their last.

The sacks that they had brought contained presents for the war orphans under the temple’s care. Toys and treats for several dozen children were not light in weight, and the temple was a long way from the palace. Even two muscled warriors would have a hard time making the trip. Indeed, Hiro had intended to transport the load by carriage, but the siblings wouldn’t stand for it.

“You think we can’t hack it, chief? Luggin’ heavy stuff’s what we’re good for! C’mon, leave it to us and save yourself the coin!”

“It’ll be nothing, Your Lordship! I’d be honored to help!”

Unwilling to refuse such an earnest offer, he had allowed them to assist, but now he wondered if they regretted asking. Both of their faces were pale with exhaustion.

“Let me do the rest,” he said. “You’ve worked hard enough.”

Huginn dumped the sack she was carrying and hurried to him, flustered. “N-Not at all, Your Lordship! I never— I mean, you mustn’t— I mean, I could do this for days! I’m so fighting fit, I could fly!”

She was mostly talking nonsense, but he got the gist.

Muninn snorted at his sister’s alarm. “Can’t burden your precious lordship’s hands, eh? She’s got a thing for you, chief.”

“I *WHAT*?! How dare you! His Lordship means a lot to me, ’course he does, but not like *that*! Well, maybe a *little* bit like that... Agh, now look what you’ve made me say!”

“Easy on the kicking, I said! My poor rear end can’t take much more!”

The pair clearly weren't as tired as they'd seemed. Relieved, Hiro turned his attention away from their bickering and back to the courtyard.

"Think you can get away, do you? Think again!"

"You're too fast, miss! That's cheating!"

Liz was playing some kind of game with the children.

"She sure can make friends..."

As Hiro marveled at how quickly Liz had blended in, he felt a tug on the hem of his jacket.

"Hey, mister?"

He looked down to see a little girl looking back. Her face was muddy from playing, but he recognized her from his last visit. Aura had patted her head. He smiled.

"Can I help you?"

"Where's Miss Aura?"

"I'm afraid she couldn't be here. She's busy today."

"Aww." The girl's face fell. "That's a shame."

Feeling a twinge of guilt, he laid a hand on her head before pointing a thumb over his shoulder. "But the nice man and woman over there have toys and candy for you."

"Really?!" The girl's eyes positively gleamed. She raised her arms and bounced up and down.

"Ask them nicely and they'll... Well, there she goes."

The girl dashed away before he could even finish his sentence.

"Booby lady! Gimme candy!"

"Gah! Get off of me, you muddy little—" Huginn fought to peel the girl off her midriff.

"Gandy! Pwetty pwease!"

"I'm getting it, I'm getting it! Oy, that's my armor! Don't— How did you even

take that off?!”

Muninn looked on, grinning. “Well, well. Look who’s popular!”

“And what are you smirking at?!”

“Agh! Mercy! My poor buttocks!”

As Huginn delivered a vicious kick to her brother’s rump, a mob of children swarmed her, drawn by cries of “candy.”

“What are you shrimps starin’ at?”

“You better stay back! One of you was bad enough!”

The siblings talked a rough game, but Hiro knew they would be gentle. They came from similar backgrounds themselves.

“I want one too!”

For a moment, he thought he saw a crimson-haired girl tackle Huginn, but he must have imagined it. Deciding to put the sight from his mind, he stepped through the temple doors.

In contrast to the chaos outside, the interior was quiet and serene. Clean air flowed into Hiro’s lungs as he breathed in, filling him with a pleasant sensation of being purified from within.

He looked around. Here and there around the hall, worshippers stood with their hands clasped, offering prayers to the Spirit King’s throne. In the shadow of the wall, a priestess watched over them. She saw him and approached, gliding silently across the floor.

“Greetings, Lord Hiro,” she said. “I am honored by your presence.”

“Sorry for intruding, but I’ve come to give you this.” He rooted through his pockets and produced a small pouch.

“I cannot thank you enough. Rest assured, this will do much good.” She took the pouch, cradling it carefully in both hands. It clinked as it settled into her fingers, the jangling of silver and gold.

Most of the spirit temple’s income came from offerings from its worshippers, with the rest comprising stipends from the empire and Baum. That only covered

the temple's upkeep, however, and not the needs of the orphans in its care. The priestess paid for their food out of her own wages, but they were barely scraping by. After learning of their plight, Hiro had decided to make regular contributions to their offertory box.

"You are every bit as noble as Her Grace the Archpriestess claimed." Her eyes glistened with emotion as she gripped his hand. "May the blessings of the Spirit King be—"

Hiro interrupted her prayer with a diplomatic smile. There was another reason he had come to the temple. Before departing Berg Fortress, he had written to Frieden with the understanding that he would collect her reply here in the capital.

"Have you received any letters from the archpriestess?"

The priestess fell silent and cocked her head in thought. A few seconds passed, then she gave a small clap of recognition.

"Indeed I have!" she said, nodding. "Now I recall. A Knight of the Spirits came by just yesterday evening!"

She released his hand and vanished into some interior room, returning in short order with a gilded envelope.

"Here you are. I swear to you, I haven't read a word!"

"Don't worry about it. It's not a big secret anyway."

Many questions hung over Garda's arrival in Soleil. Ambition was surrounded by raging seas that impeded entry or exit. Any ordinary man would have drowned trying to make the crossing, but Garda had survived to wash up in Lichtein and, what was more, seemed to have no idea how. Hiro had hoped that the archpriestess's powers might provide some insight.

"Here's hoping I'm wrong..."

A transcendent being which existed outside the reach of perception would surely defy even her capabilities.

Hiro broke the seal on the letter and read it through. Unfortunately, it was as he had feared. The contents were brief: *I sense nothing.*

“As I thought. And if her eyes aren’t enough...that could be trouble.”

The archpriestess possessed one of the Three Great Arcane Eyes: the eye known as the Far Sight. Successive generations of archpriestesses passed the power down to their successors in a ritual so secret that even Hiro didn’t know what it entailed.

“I’d better visit Frieden sooner rather than later,” he murmured to himself. He needed to speak with her directly, not least to ask her to investigate in greater detail.

He stowed the letter in his pocket and bowed his head to the temple priestess. “I should be going. I have business back at the palace.”

“Are you certain? Can I not offer you a cup of tea?”

“I’m afraid not. I have people waiting on me outside.”

“I see. Another time, then, perhaps.” The woman sighed in disappointment.

Hiro bid her farewell and stepped back outside the temple. All around the courtyard, children were playing with their new toys. Liz, Huginn, and Muninn sat slumped to the side, tired out from their games. He walked closer and waved.

“Have you handed out everything?”

“Every last sack,” Liz said. “The children were so happy, you wouldn’t believe it!”

“We should be getting back to the palace. Huginn, Muninn, can you manage that?”

“If you say so, chief...”

“Always, Your Lordship! I could sprint right there this second!”

“That...won’t be necessary. We’ve got time.”

Seeing Huginn perk up while her brother lay sprawled on the ground, Hiro couldn’t help but smile.

The name of Venezyne meant different things to different people. To the Knights of the Golden Lion, elite warriors of the First Legion, it meant the east

of the palace grounds, where they kept their barracks and training field. Rare was the moment they were not drilling, and fierce cries shook the air from dawn until dusk. They served under the personal command of the emperor himself, and unless he was on campaign, their duty was to guard the capital.

It had been two centuries since the capital had last seen war.

Two hundred years was a long time; too long for any force, no matter how elite, to remain idle without stagnating. The court smirked that the knights weren't even battle-tested, and who could blame them? What enemy would fear a lion that had never known the hunt? And so the emperor had made use of the war in the west to let the beast loose, that it might recall its instincts.

As a certain individual once said: "There is naught so fearsome as a lion freed from its cage, for royalty brooks no defiance." Nothing less than excellence was expected from them on the battlefield. And today, as every day, they trained for battle with foes yet uncertain.

A figure looked on as the knights drilled. His hair was as golden as a lion's pelt, with its fringe thrust upward like a mane. The noble finery he wore hid his muscular physique, but there was no concealing the authority he radiated. The man's name was First Prince Rein Hardt Stovell von Grantz, and he was currently under house arrest.

"Naught better to do, I take it?" It was not Stovell who spoke, but the man approaching him from behind: Trye Hlín von Loeing, one of the empire's five high generals. He gestured to an empty chair. "Is this seat taken?"

Stovell didn't reply, which von Loeing took as permission to sit. The man was fifty-seven years of age, but he moved like a warrior half as old.

"Your granddaughter has come of age, has she not?" Stovell asked. "Should you not be with her?"

The younger daughter of von Loeing's only son had celebrated her twentieth year the previous day.

"A man under house arrest is not what one might call a welcome guest at the table."

Stovell snorted. "As though anyone would dare say a word to the greatest

general in the land.”

“My wife...requested that I not be present.” Von Loeing tugged absently at his beard. “Out of concern for the girl’s future.”

“She seeks a position in the south?”

Von Loeing nodded. No further explanation was necessary. Although he had lost command of the Fourth Legion when placed under house arrest, his family were still southern nobles with lands in the southern territories, where the fourth prince’s and sixth princess’s influence was waxing by the day. As the head of the house, his connections to First Prince Stovell put the rest of his family in an awkward position—one that was perhaps only hypothetical for now but would very quickly become reality if House Muzuk were to declare support for Fourth Prince Hiro or Sixth Princess Elizabeth.

“With some words in the right ears,” Stovell said, “I could find her a place in the central territories.”

It was a generous offer, but von Loeing shook his head. For a while, he seemed to struggle for the right words. At last, he admitted, “My granddaughter idolizes Lady Celia Estrella.”

Stovell understood immediately what “concerns” the old general had meant. The girl was hoping to be assigned to the sixth princess’s service in Berg Fortress.

“Then she shares your contempt for the easy road. That, or she possesses a surfeit of confidence.”

“She takes after me in temperament, it’s true. Although not in looks, I hear.”

Von Loeing flashed a self-effacing grin. Stovell could guess what the man was thinking, and he had to agree. What the stern old general might look like as a woman was a terror best not entertained.

The old general raised his arms in a martial stance, held still for a breath, and slashed at empty air. “And not in this way either. She barely knows which end of the blade to hold. I hear that she hopes to be taken on as a civil tribune.”

“I see. I understand her position.” Stovell paused, signifying an end to the

exchange of pleasantries. “Go ahead. State your business. Surely you are not here to bandy words.” Not once had the old general ever visited him solely to discuss personal matters.

“I confess, I had hoped you might not catch on so quickly.”

“The distraction was welcome but a distraction nonetheless.”

“Indeed.”

Von Loeing’s affable expression slipped from his face as he assumed a high general’s authority. The air around him grew tangibly more tense, carefree joviality smothered by burning intensity. He radiated a might that seemed to scorch Stovell’s skin.

“There are unusual movements in Lebering.”

“On whose part?”

“It appears that Crown Prince Flaus is plotting something.”

Stovell scoffed. “That imbecile?”

Stovell had only spoken to Flaus on one occasion, perhaps two years prior, but that had been enough to tell the boy was rotten. He kept up a noble facade, but his mind was as wicked as they came. Perhaps the royal line of Lebering could not match the Grantzian royal family for dark secrets, but they had their own share of skeletons in their closet.

“The fool isn’t powerful enough to orchestrate anything on his own. Someone else must be pulling his strings. But now I am curious. Where did you come by this information?”

“The Nameless Man visited my private residence yesterday.”

“Him.” Stovell scowled. “Of course.”

The so-called Nameless Man was the álf Stovell had reputedly recruited to his service. He told no one his name, and his place of residence was a mystery. Occasionally, he swept into strategy meetings to offer advice before leaving as quickly as he had arrived. In no time at all, talk had spread that he was a member of Stovell’s retinue—a rumor the first prince had decided would be too bothersome to quash.

“I would be a fool to trust the man, but I suppose I must trust his abilities.”
There was no mistaking the irritation in Stovell’s voice.

Von Loeing nodded gravely. “His information has never once steered us wrong.”

“Unfortunately, I can do little trapped in the palace. This act I must watch from the gallery.”

“True enough. Although it sits ill with me to possess this knowledge and do nothing with it.”

“The emperor, that sly old fox... He knows of this.”

Deceiving the emperor’s all-seeing gaze was no easy matter. If it were, Stovell would not have been sitting blithely under house arrest. He snorted in contempt.

“Well, I suppose house arrest is not so bad. I have finally managed to attend to matters that I have been neglecting.”

“Is it not reckless to do such things beneath His Majesty’s nose?”

“It matters not if he finds out. He cannot stop me now. No one can.” Stovell stood to face the palace proper, which was abustle at that very moment with the fourth prince and sixth princess’s arrival. “But I will suffer no interference. The time has come to shake up the board.”

He turned to stare past the palace walls. Beyond his gaze lay the western sky.

“If my competitors seek glory, perhaps I should speed them on their way.”

Hiro and Liz were winning steady recognition in the field. Third Prince Brutahl, desperate to avoid falling behind, was pushing his troops ever harder in Faerzen.

“One must take care not to win too many victories. To never know defeat is a fine thing, but such heroes tend to meet unpleasant ends.”

The Grantzian Empire’s course was already set in stone. It could not be changed, any more than could the rising of the sun or the setting of the moon.

The sky had bled dusk-red as Hiro and his party returned to the palace. Now he was in Liz's chambers, waiting for Liz and Rosa to attend to their preparations.

"Are you done yet?" he asked.

The women blinked in surprise.

"We should be asking you that," Rosa said crossly.

Hiro's gift twinkled on her slender finger as she folded her arms. The ring was set with a crystal that had cost considerably less than a true gemstone, but set against Rosa in her red dress, it shone with a brilliance worth far more.

"Um..." Liz smiled glassily as she brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "I think you'd better get started."

She was not dressed in her usual military uniform but in a black dress with red accents. A necklace—another gift from Hiro—sat at her throat.

"I'm fine as I am. Come on, let's go," Hiro replied.

The female contingent's gazes turned chilly. He unconsciously took a step back.

"You mean to go looking like *that*?"

"Shouldn't you at least comb your hair?"

The women sighed in exasperation, stood from their chairs, and stepped closer. A waft of sweet perfume tickled his nostrils as they set about fussing over him.

"The Black Camellia will do for an outfit, but we must find you a fragrance. You'll be interacting with noblewomen at the banquet, remember. You'll want to make the best impression you can."

Speaking half to herself, Rosa drew away and rifled through a small box beside her mirror. She returned cradling an armful of glass bottles.

"This one is most in vogue...but no, they'll take you for a dandy." She parsed through her perfumes, muttering.

By her side, Liz reached out to stroke the lock of hair at Hiro's temple. She

made a noise of discontent. “I wonder if this will comb out? It looks stubborn...”

Rosa stared at her incredulously, her chosen bottle in hand. “If you’re thinking of washing it, forget it. It won’t have time to dry.”

Before Hiro could protest, she stripped off his shirt—putting his wiry musculature on full display—and splashed perfume around his waist. A gentle fragrance tickled his nostrils, while a refreshing scent mingled with the surrounding air.

Rosa brought her nose up to his chest and sniffed. “Good. Not too overpowering. Subtle, even. Ibelin does fine work.” She nodded in satisfaction. “If anybody asks you what you’re wearing, tell them it’s *Stille* by Ibelin Ishtark of the east.”

A calculating grin spread across her delicate features. Even now, she was trying to advance her own interests.

Hiro shrugged, his smile just a little forced. “I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Right!” Liz exclaimed from beside his ear. “Your braid’s done!”

Hiro raised a hand to his temple to feel a coarse-woven pattern. The braid on his right-hand side offset the forbidding eyepatch on his left, creating a striking aesthetic.

Rosa put a hand to her cheek and gazed at him admiringly. “That’s a good look. Very good, actually. You should wear your hair like that more often.”

“Right? I always knew it would suit him!” Liz latched onto her sister’s arm, giggling. “It looks great!”

“Indeed. I look forward to this evening.”

It was heartwarming to see the sisters enjoying each other’s company, but Hiro knew that this was only a temporary reprieve. The night could not be all laughing and joking. Soon, they would face the emperor.

I’d love to relax and enjoy the banquet...but work comes first.

✱

The ceiling of the throne room was as high as Hiro remembered, and the

carpet that ran the length of the flagstone floor was just as red. Along the wings of the cavernous space, white stone columns stood in stately rows with the nobility packed between them. Only by advancing beneath their searching gazes could one reach the far end to stand before the emperor.

Hiro fell to one knee in front of the throne and lowered his head. Beside him, Liz adopted the same vassal's bow. The emperor said nothing, but raised a lazy hand.

Chancellor Graeci stepped forward. "His Majesty the Emperor hereby confers honors due."

The elderly man's voice carried confidently in the silence of the chamber. The nobles straightened. Every gaze in the room converged on him.

"Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz and Sixth Princess Celia Estrella, you may raise your heads."

Hiro and Liz looked up as one. In front of them rose the figure of the chancellor, his noble's finery woven through with silver and gold. In his hand he held a scroll, which he raised before his chest as he read in sonorous tones.

"First, Major General Celia Estrella. His Majesty commends your capable leadership of the Fourth Legion during the Lichtein offensive, particularly in light of the errors made by the late General von Kilo. To you, he awards formal command of the Fourth Legion, as well as the leadership of the Knights of the Rose."

"I humbly accept His Majesty's reward." Liz bowed her head once more. A ripple of whispers spread through the chamber, as though a rock had been cast into a still pool.

"His Majesty would give a unit of knights? To her?"

"Never mind that; what of General von Loeing? Was the Fourth Legion not under his command?"

"Never mind *that*, you fool! Do you realize how much this strengthens her position in the south?!"

The sound of noble panic was music to Hiro's ears, although he was a little

taken aback himself. The Knights of the Rose were some of the finest warriors in the empire. They were a cavalry unit renowned for their mobility, wearing only light armor in contrast to the heavily armored shock troops that were the Second Legion's Knights of the Royal Black. The emperor had not seen fit to entrust General von Kilo with their command, so they had not been present for the march into Lichtein. For a mere major general to receive that honor was almost unheard of. Still, it was no bad thing. The knights would be an invaluable asset to Liz in the weeks and months to come.

"Next, Third Tribune Hiro Schwartz. Word has reached His Majesty of your part in steering the Fourth Legion to victory against Lichtein. He acknowledges the enormity of your accomplishment and regrets that the covenant signed between His Majesty the First Emperor and the archpriestess of Baum forbids him from awarding you land, as he would wish. Instead, he promotes you by two ranks to the position of first class military tribune and awards you the sum of one hundred golden grantzes."

"I thank His Majesty for his generosity."

Somewhere in the crowd, someone began to clap for them. The applause swelled, first sparse, then louder. Gradually, it grew to a roaring crescendo that filled the throne room. Chancellor Graeci stood quietly, eyes closed, judging it imprudent to interrupt. The emperor, too, sat in silence for a while, watching events unfold, but eventually he grew impatient and raised his hand to quell the noise.

Solemnity, authority, majesty—all lay in that gesture. A wave of unassailable power swept through the chamber. A cold wind blew, though all of the windows were closed. The chamber fell silent, its fervor snuffed out in an instant. Tension hung in the air like a taut thread.

The emperor glanced at Chancellor Graeci, who started and hurriedly produced a new scroll of parchment.

"Moving on to the next item on the agenda...I now pronounce council in session. The matter at hand is the occupation of Faerzen."

The command signaled Hiro and Liz to rise. Now that their deeds had been recognized, decorum decreed they retreat to the wings to stand with the rest of

the nobles.

“Nervous?” Hiro whispered.

Liz pulled a conflicted face. “Not exactly, but I’ve never liked it here. I always find it hard to breathe.”

The throne room swirled with jealousy, hatred, and other dark emotions. Liz had been chosen by Lævateinn and now handpicked to command the Fourth Legion, all in a world where women were considered weak—her success had no doubt set many people fuming. The thunderous applause of earlier might have been the greatest surprise of the night so far.

“The two of you looked quite the part.”

As Hiro and Liz pushed through the crowd, it parted to reveal a woman seated in a chair. Eastern nobles surrounded her protectively.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Liz pouted. “*You* were the first one to clap.”

Rosa shut one eye and set a mischievous finger to her lips. “If a few applauded, the rest would have to join in. Nobles are calculating creatures. They may oppose you, but they won’t risk standing out from the crowd to do it. All I did was make supporting you the socially acceptable choice.” She gave a deep-throated chuckle. “Exhilarating, is it not, to see them squirm after all they put you through? And this will not be the end. I have plenty more in store for the boors who dared to mock my little sister.”

“You won’t be helping much if you go around making me enemies.”

Liz was plenty good at doing that herself, Hiro thought, but he stopped short of saying it out loud—it would only blow up in his face.

“Worry not; I am making you allies too. And if you are ever truly in trouble”—Rosa shot Hiro a smoldering gaze—“your prince will come to your rescue, will he not?”

Hiro duly nodded. There was no telling how Rosa might take it if he showed reluctance here. She was being strangely insistent; perhaps the clotted air of the throne room was getting to her. It was better not to tug this particular tiger’s tail.

In any case, there were more important matters at hand. He turned his attention back to the throne.

“These upstart rebels only dare defy us because we waste our time making overtures of peace!” one noble cried. “I say we put them in their place!”

“Rank idiocy,” scoffed another. “In bringing more war to Faerzen, you would provoke its neighbors. We must make peace with the Resistance by any means necessary, even if that means returning some portion of their land.”

Some voices clamored for war, while others urged caution. Naturally, yet others weighed the balance of both.

“The royal line of Faerzen is dead. With no masters to fight for, this Faerzen Resistance is no better than a band of brigands, and the empire does not strike deals with brigands.”

“And the land they squat on is the empire’s by right! That they snatched it away during the dark ages does not make it theirs!”

A bevy of opinions flew about the room, but they lacked a decisive voice.

This is what happens when you crush instead of conquer. You need to give your enemy a way out, or things get messy.

If any of the royal family had survived, the situation would have been salvageable, but they had all been slaughtered during the invasion. Now there were only three paths left to the empire: crush the resistance with overwhelming force, withdraw temporarily to concentrate them before sweeping back in to slaughter them, or withdraw altogether and focus on undermining them via sabotage and inflaming the citizenry.

There’s not much hope for a peace treaty...not least because the emperor won’t want to give up his prize.

Relinquishing Faerzen would destabilize the west, threatening the integrity of the entire empire. If that happened, the emperor’s hopes of unifying Soleil within his lifetime would vanish like smoke in a breeze.

He’s already sixty-seven. He doesn’t have much time left.

Even an emperor couldn’t cheat death. That very urgency was probably why

the man had personally led the offensive into Faerzen, which would form his foothold in the west.

As the thought passed through Hiro's head, the doors to the chamber swung open and an official entered. He scurried down the hall beneath the nobles' scornful glares to whisper something into Chancellor Graeci's ear.

The chancellor's face turned grave. "Understood. You are dismissed."

With a bow, the official retreated. Graeci turned in a flutter of silks and held a brief exchange with the emperor. The latter's expression turned sour, his brow creasing in what might have been anger. He issued some command. Graeci nodded and turned back to address the hall, consternation written plain on his face.

"Word has arrived that the Grand Duchy of Draal is amassing its forces," he announced.

"Impossible!" someone exclaimed.

With that, the floodgates opened, and an uproar filled the room.

"But have they not only just signed an armistice with Steissen?!"

"They still haven't the numbers to pose a threat. If they wish to attack the west, let them come. We should welcome the excuse to lay them to waste."

"With what men? All of our troops in the west are preoccupied dealing with Faerzen."

"Then we need only procure more from other territories."

"And who do you propose will field these men?"

"You central nobles, of course. Surely you have the men to spare for an emergency? With your reluctance to lend anybody your aid, the Divines know you don't use them."

"As if you Easterners weren't just as stingy!"

"You dare liken us?! Yes, we are too far from the battlefield to send men, but we keep the armies fed, and we shoulder the costs of war! I have yet to see a central noble offer a single dratz—"

Snap. A sudden sound, like a bursting bubble, cut through the commotion. Every voice fell silent at the noise. A peculiar tension settled over the hall—a sensation that invisible blades had been sculpted from thin air by raw malice to point at every throat; a disconcerting pressure like a hundred painless needles driving steadily deeper into the flesh.

Hiro looked around as he soothed an alarmed Black Camellia. Every noble in the room was rooted in place, their faces taut with fear. He returned his gaze to the throne to see that the emperor had risen from his seat.

The man doesn't wear the crown for nothing...although he's still just a shadow of the emperor Artheus was.

"If any among you has an opinion to raise, let them step forward." The man's voice carried through the throne room with uncanny clarity. All present could do naught but listen.

There it is, Hiro thought. Just one last push...

Just one person confident enough to raise their voice would give the emperor the nudge he needed. The heavens seemed to hear his prayers, as First Prince Stovell advanced from the crowd.

"Allow me."

Stovell was enormous, and muscular to boot. His loose-fitting noble attire might have covered his physique, but it could not conceal his dark presence. The air groaned with the weight of every step he took. His gaze bored into the throne, although the emperor did not so much as twitch an eyebrow in response.

"Speak."

"At the same time as the Faerzen insurgency rears its head, the Grand Duchy of Draal and the Republic of Steissen sign an armistice. Now Draal is massing for war. This cannot be a coincidence. No, they are working in concert, and who is to say which other nations may find common cause with them? We must crush the Faerzen Resistance quickly and utterly, not least to show their neighbors the consequences of defiance." Stovell sank to one knee. "You need only give the order, Your Majesty."

The emperor leaned back in his throne, closing his eyes in thought.

“Does anybody else desire to speak?”

“Allow me to make another proposition, Your Majesty,” Hiro said.

For the slightest of instants, far too quickly for anyone to detect, the emperor’s lips curled in amusement. “You may speak.”

“I believe it would be hasty to conclude that just because the Grand Duchy is marshaling its forces, they mean to invade the empire.”

The emperor nodded, which Hiro took to mean that he was allowed to continue.

“That is not to say we should ignore the threat they pose, but a show of force, even a small one, ought to deter them from making any sudden moves.”

The emperor’s brow furrowed. “And what of the Faerzen Resistance?”

Hiro smiled. “I say we dispatch a new force to work in concert with the Second Legion and trap the enemy between two armies. If the resistance goes to ground, we can still go after their collaborators, even if the process will be more involved.”

For a time, the emperor fell into a pensive silence. Eventually, he spoke again. “Your opinions have both been noted. We shall do as Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz suggests.”

Like that, the course was set. There was no more room for debate. Only someone extremely confident in their position would dare to question the emperor’s judgment. Even then, failing to persuade him would bring disgrace down on their family for generations to come.

Now all that’s left is to put Liz forward to command.

As Hiro pondered his next move, Chancellor Graeci’s gaze swept over the room.

“As for who ought to lead this prospective force...” the man began.

Hiro opened his mouth to speak, but somebody else beat him to it.

“I propose Sixth Princess Celia Estrella.”

The words came from, of all people, Stovell. Hiro frowned. What was the man planning? Stovell seemed to sense him staring and turned to look him straight in the eyes. His smile deepened before he returned his gaze to the emperor.

“She has become something of a rising star in recent weeks, but I suspect that some here still lack confidence in her. Let her take this chance to prove her worth.”

More muttering rose from the crowd.

“The first prince speaks wisely. Lady Celia Estrella is a fine choice.”

“The girl’s not been long in command. Would she not jeopardize the mission?”

“Not if she fights as she fought in Lichtein. She has a bright future ahead of her, that one.”

Stovell’s voice rang out to quash the whispers. “And if you would but annul my house arrest, I shall set out for Draal myself. I swear, I will not let you down.”

That marked time for Hiro to intervene. There was no telling what Stovell was plotting, but he could cause a great deal of chaos from a position of command.

“Annul your punishment? With all due respect, I do not believe that someone who thinks so lightly of His Majesty’s judgment is fit for command.” Hiro smirked at the first prince. “We would not want a repeat of Faerzen.”

“Watch your words, boy.”

Stovell’s glare was as sharp as a blade, but Hiro didn’t so much as blink. “Or what?” he said in his most cutting voice. “Will you stab me in the back again?”

For an instant, they seemed ready to kill each other on the spot. Their clashing wills endowed the air around them with an oppressive weight. Stovell’s body crackled with coils of lightning, which snaked across the floor, gouging, scouring, crushing, lashing.

In contrast, Hiro did not so much as take up a combat stance. He only stood in his typical careless manner, seemingly defenseless, but rents appeared in empty space around him with a succession of unpleasant *pops*. The darkness of the

Black Camellia began to flutter and swell, despite the lack of wind in the chamber.

Most of the onlookers shied away in fear, overawed by the gravity of their presence, but a small few gazed in wonder at the phenomenon developing around Hiro. The air around him swelled with radiance, until—

“Enough.”

The austere voice of the emperor cut between them. The murder that had weighed so heavily in the air dissipated in an instant.

“I will not permit this barbarity in my presence. Restrain yourselves.”

“I apologize, Your Majesty. My temper seems to have gotten the better of me.” Hiro touched a hand to his eyepatch as he sank to one knee. Beside him, Stovell also bowed.

“Impropriety notwithstanding,” the emperor declared, “I find myself in agreement with Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz. The secondary army will travel to Faerzen under the command of Celia Estrella. I will entrust the matter of Draal to High General Vakish, who is charged with keeping the peace on the western border. For him to cow the Grand Duchy will be no great effort.”

A welcome turn of events. Hidden by his downturned face, Hiro’s smile deepened. *Another step closer to where we need to be.*

The emperor surely had his pick of capable commanders, and the empire had no shortage of talent. In this case, however, the most convenient choice was somebody like Liz, with no support from any quarter—or officially declared support, at any rate—to defend her interests or strengthen her position. Moreover, now that she had driven back the forces of Lichtein at Gurinda and then fought them to surrender on their own soil, few could protest her appointment.

The stage was more or less set. All that remained was to seize victory and move on to greater heights.

“I have a mission for you too, Hiro Schwartz.”

“Your Majesty.”

“Princess Claudia of Lebering is soon to hold her coming-of-age ceremony. I wish you to represent the empire in the capacity of special envoy.”

Hiro looked up in surprise.

“Does this displease you?”

“N-No, Your Majesty. I gratefully accept.”

Hiro quietly ground his teeth. He had expected to be assigned as Liz’s advisor, but apparently, he had misread the situation.

I might have been a little too successful...

His list of achievements had been growing ever since he had first arrived in Aletia. His victory in Lichtein was only the most recent example. Now that he had the support of the eastern nobles, the factions who opposed them would be starting to see him as a serious threat. With so many fires smoldering outside the empire’s borders, it would be wise to avoid encouraging destabilizing influences within the nation—otherwise, the empire might fall apart. It was no surprise that the emperor wanted to keep him and Liz separated.

Well, it’s no great inconvenience. It won’t take long, and I can regroup with Liz once I’m done.

With his thoughts at last in order, Hiro looked back up at the emperor.

“Lebering was founded by a member of Mars’s Black Hand, I believe,” the man continued. “Such a bond, not even time can sever. I can think of none more suitable for what must be done.”

Something about the emperor’s words struck Hiro as ominous, but he took care not to let his doubts show as he bowed his head obediently. “As you command.”

The emperor nodded in acknowledgment, pleased with Hiro’s reply. “And as for the city of Sieg,” he announced to the hall at large, “I will take it under my personal jurisdiction for the time being. If anybody objects, they may speak now.”

Nobody would. If Viscount von Wirst’s criminal deeds became public, many of

the central nobles would be disgraced, and that would have its own repercussions. All parties had no choice but to maintain silence on the matter, the emperor included. This struggle would be a bitter one, but it would continue in the shadows, not in the light.

“Nobody? Good. Then I hereby declare the floor closed.”

As the emperor fell silent, Chancellor Graeci stepped forward to take his place. “Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz and Sixth Princess Celia Estrella, you will receive your formal orders at a later time. Until then, I invite you to enjoy tonight’s festivities.”

With that, the council ended. The last event of the night would be a banquet to celebrate the empire’s victory over Lichtein.

The emperor and chancellor both retreated from the throne room. When the door at last closed behind them, a hubbub spread among the nobles as they remembered how to breathe.

Banquets are held to delight their attendants, irrespective of the world outside their walls. Warfare might consume the west and calamity loom over the north, but what did the nobles of the central territories care about that? They might sense that something was amiss, but whatever it was felt distant and unimportant—a testament to the scale and security of the Grantzian Empire.

Concerns were not wholly absent from the hall, of course. The recent flood of ill tidings bred its fair share of uncertainty. Still, nobles could not expect to brood in public and maintain their dignity, and so most hid their fears beneath unworried smiles and went about their usual business of advancing their interests.

“But I must take my leave, Lord Hiro. I look forward to a long and fruitful relationship.”

“As do I. Until next time.”

As the minor noble shuffled away through the crowd, Hiro sank into a sofa by the wall.

It looks like I’m through the worst of it...

He looked down in chagrin at the bundle of envelopes in his hands. Passing on love letters from besotted daughters had been a popular excuse for nobles to make conversation. Most of those vying for his attention had been from the eastern territories, followed by their central counterparts, although a smattering of merchants hoping to expand into the south had also approached him to offer their financial backing.

If nothing else, this shows that House Krone's control is slipping.

He looked around the banquet hall. Lords and ladies thronged the chamber, engaged in merry conversation. They swarmed thickest of all around Liz who, in her inexperience, had initially been flustered by their attentions before Rosa came to her rescue. With her older sister's guidance, things were now going more smoothly.

The introductions should level off soon enough. Then we can start looking into who we've been talking to.

They had choices to make—difficult decisions about which houses' heads to replace and which to cut loose once the central territories fell into their grasp. Still, haste would make waste. The matter of Faerzen needed to come first.

Then there's the question of how Stovell will respond...

After the way Hiro had frustrated him in the throne room, it would be optimistic to expect the man to take any reckless risks. He would be more cautious from now on in the way that he moved against them.

Besides, this second prince makes me uneasy. What's he doing up there in the north?

And that was to say nothing of the northern nobles who backed him. What were they planning?

It's just like the last banquet. There's not a single one here.

The factions of the north kept an ominous silence, as though they had no interest at all in the imperial succession. Hiro simply knew too little about them to act. If he moved first, they would outmaneuver him; if he showed any weakness, they would exploit it. With no good options, all he could do was sit and wait for the second prince to make contact.

Things aren't all going to plan anymore. This is only going to get tougher from here on out. Hiro's fingers brushed his eyepatch. His smile grew wider. *But I wouldn't have it any other way. The more formidable my enemies, the stronger they will make me.*

With his head whirling with unfinished plans, Hiro rose to his feet and made his way over to Liz. The princess looked utterly exhausted as she sipped a glass of water.

Rosa saw him and looked up with a wry grin. "Her Highness has had her fill of introductions."

"So I see. It's only going to get worse, though."

Liz's head whipped up in horror at that, to which Hiro could only respond with a look of sympathy. The banquet and its greetings had only just begun. She might have worked her way through the powerful houses and their associates, but a host of lesser nobles still waited in the wings.

"Best foot forward, Liz. There's no telling who might grow into a powerful ally. Besides, some of them might make useful subordinates. You have a duty to lend them an ear. That's the burden of all who aspire to the throne."

Or at least, that's what Artheus always used to say, he silently added.

Borrowed wisdom or not, his words seemed to strike a chord with Liz. She gave a resolute little nod and smiled. "All right. I'll try."

Rosa's hand clamped down on Hiro's shoulder. "You say that as though it does not apply to you. You have a horde of lesser nobles scrambling for your attention."

He looked around. Sure enough, half of the hall was casting him expectant glances. As soon as one person stepped forward, they would all fall on him like an avalanche.

"They can wait. I said my greetings last time."

He turned to make a rapid exit, but Rosa's nails dug into his shoulder.

"Many more are here today than last time. Most will not have met you. So? What happened to the burden of the throne or whatever it was you called it?"

She had a point. Hiro was fourth in the line of succession, close enough to reach out and touch the crown.

“Well,” Rosa continued, “at the very least, I can keep these floozies from bothering you.” She snatched one of the love letters from his hands, her lips curling into a wicked grin as she read the sender’s name. “Oh? This girl’s from the east. Interesting.”

Hiro took an involuntary step back. Perhaps he should have kept those to himself. “It’s getting hot in here. I should go and get some air.”

“Oh?” Rosa’s eyebrows rose. “Do I detect another conquest for the Black Prince? They do say heroes are voracious in *all* appetites. I suppose it must be true.” She expelled a deep sigh and leaned suggestively over the table. “First you seduce the Valditte, then you coerce a vulnerable widow into satisfying your lust, now you break the hearts of half the noble maids in the empire, and you still haven’t had your fill?”

Did she really have to list those things? And did she really have to phrase them like *that*? More to the point, Hiro had no recollection of “seducing” Liz or of “coercing” Rosa into anything. He opened his mouth to argue, but Rosa’s finger on his lips stopped him short.

“Let me guess. After the second emperor was such a rake that they called him Julius—Maidensbane—it’s simply your birthright?”

“They called him *what*?”

“Oh? Weren’t you aware? There are *plays* about it.”

Hiro had very much not been aware. If anything, Artheus had always been the womanizer of the two. History had seen the truth twist with a remarkable irony...and Hiro suspected that a certain hand had done the twisting.

“I’d heard that the first emperor was a ladies’ man,” he ventured, “but not the second.”

“Emperor Artheus had a well-documented weakness for the queens and princesses of the nations he conquered, it’s true. Still, the man’s own memoirs testify that he was nothing compared to his brother.”

Artheus, you son of a bitch.

It was time to drop the subject. This was one sleeping dog best left alone. Trying not to let his distress show, Hiro settled into a prudent silence. Unfortunately, that only seemed to encourage Rosa all the more.

“It should only be expected that you take after your ancestor, I suppose. It’s just a shame that you inherited his character as well as his face. To look at you, one wouldn’t think you would hurt a fly. To think such a scoundrel was hidden within... It’s enough to make a big sister cry!”

She flung her arms around Liz and wept theatrically. Hiro could only summon an awkward laugh.

Liz wrapped an arm around her sister’s head. “I think you’ve had too much to drink,” she said. She looked at Hiro and thrust her chin toward the exit—*go while you still can.*

Silently thanking her, Hiro headed for the door.

“A question for you, sister dearest,” came Rosa’s voice as he left.

“What?” Liz’s voice was cold.

“Is it just my imagination or are you trying to crush my skull?”

“It must be a headache from all that wine you drank.”

“But I only had two gla—”

Hiro could have sworn that he heard a grisly crunch somewhere behind him, but the doors shut before he could turn around to see.

Reap what you sow, I suppose.

The courtyard was quiet and still, a welcome reprieve from the heaving crowd of the banquet. A single fountain lay in the center, but it was otherwise unadorned. The night wind brushed Hiro’s skin as he took a seat on the fountain’s rim.

“I felt it, you know,” he said to the empty air. “Faintly.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, rectangular card; the same one he had received from his blood-brother so long ago. Its surface was an

ominous swirl of white and black. He looked up at the stars.

“What is it you *want*, Artheus?”

His words vanished into the night sky. The only answer was the brush of the wind on his ears, caressing his eardrums. He closed his eyes—and a sudden voice called out to him.

“My, my. You don’t see one of those every day.”

Immediately, Hiro was on guard, all his senses honed to a razor’s edge.

“Dear me. Did I startle you?”

“How long have you been there?”

“What are you saying, my lord? I was here long before you.”

A cowed robe covered the figure from head to toe, making it impossible to tell if they were male or female. Even their voice was androgynous. They were so out-of-place, they seemed almost insubstantial, as though they might dissipate at a touch.

“You can’t have been. I never sensed a thing.” Hiro drew a deep breath, shifting his stance to make himself ready for battle. “Tell me who you are.”

“I suppose I must, if I am to ease your suspicion.” The figure nodded to themselves, then swept into a graceful bow. “I fear I cannot divulge my face, but I am a servant of First Prince Stovell—and an álf, if that should interest you.” They set their fingers to either side of their head, mimicking long ears.

Now that Hiro thought about it, he had heard of such an individual from Drix. “So what do you want with me?” he asked.

“Nothing much, my lord. You have a curious item there. It simply happened to catch my eye.” The álf pointed to the card with a giggle before turning away. “But we will have other chances to speak at greater length.”

Hiro’s brow furrowed at that comment, but as he opened his mouth to ask what it meant—

“Hiro! Where are you?”

A girl’s voice—Liz’s—distracted him for a brief second, and when he turned

his attention back, the álf had vanished.

“Well,” he noted drily, “that was certainly no servant.”

He had still not let down his guard by the time Liz found him.

“There you are! What was taking you so long? I was worried!”

“Sorry. Is the banquet over already?”

“It is. Although *someone* spent most of it outside.”

Hiro paused. “So what’s the matter with Rosa? Too much to drink?”

Liz, with her unnatural strength, was carrying Rosa over one shoulder.

“I don’t know. She’s been passed out ever since you left.” Liz grinned. “Well, she’s always a drama queen, so I’m sure she’s fine.”

“If you say so...” Hiro winced just a little. “I guess we should head back to her home.”

He took Rosa’s limp body from Liz, and together they set out. House Kelheit’s estate was notably more extravagant than even those of other great houses, reflecting Rosa’s status as the former third princess. With strict security and private soldiers standing guard twenty-four hours a day, it was one of the safest locations on the already secure palace grounds. The trio opened the ornate front door and passed inside. The house servants greeted them within.

“Oh, of course,” Liz exclaimed. “I should go and get changed.” She vanished down a corridor, waving over her shoulder as she went.

“This way, please.”

A servant escorted Hiro through into the same bedchamber as his previous visit. He laid Rosa down on the bed and sank into a nearby chair.

“Phew...”

As the sigh left his mouth, a murderous aura emanated from the bed.

“Exhausted, are we? Was I a heavy weight to carry?” The drunkard was awake—and glaring at him with naked animosity.

“You could have walked back yourself.”

“And miss the chance to have the Black Prince carry me home? I wouldn’t give that up for the world.”

“Well, aren’t you lucky. Maybe I should have had a sip of that wine myself.”

A terse voice came from the entrance. Hiro glanced over to see Liz standing in the doorway, now dressed in her nightwear. She closed the door behind her as she stepped inside.

Rosa laughed. “Maybe when you’re older. Wine is for adults, not sweet little ladies.”

“I *am* an adult. I’m sixteen.”

“In years, perhaps, but you lack an adult’s charm.”

“Just because I’m a little on the small side...” Liz’s face fell a little as she glanced between her sister’s chest and her own.

Rosa clapped her hands in sudden inspiration. “Do you know, I hear that they’ll grow if you have a man fondle them.”

“Really?!”

Liz took the bait hook, line, and sinker. Hiro could only stare in incredulity. Apparently, she really was that naive.

“Hiro! Fondle me!”

He sighed. Just as he’d feared... With a glare at Rosa, who was stifling her laughter behind her hand, he leveled an exasperated gaze at Liz. “Stop being silly. Besides, girls shouldn’t go around talking about *fondling*.”

His attempt to be serious only earned him two disdainful looks. So this was what happened when sobriety met drunkenness. Things got awkward.

“Hmph. Be like that, then.”

Liz tumbled into bed, pouting. With one final glare, Rosa lay down too.

“What was I supposed to say?”

The night crept on, with Hiro none the wiser about the mysteries of the female heart.

The next morning

The sun seemed particularly brilliant as it shone proudly in the eastern sky, and the gentle breeze that ran over the land did little to assuage its heat. Beneath its gaze sprawled the imperial capital of Cladius, the pinnacle of splendor.

At the city's north gate, a host of warhorses stood in ranks. Two thousand cavalry clad in pitch-black armor lined up in the center. On their west side were five thousand riders from the First Legion's reserves, marked by golden sashes over their shoulders, and three thousand from the Fourth Legion, marked by similar sashes in red. To their east stood over five thousand soldiers from the eastern nobility.

Standard bearers dashed up and down the files, plowing up columns of dust. The standards served a variety of purposes—raising morale, reminding the rank and file who commanded them—and their actual effects were just as varied; the air swirled with a mixture of elation and tension. It made for a sight to overawe the commonfolk, who looked on from atop the city walls with lumps of astonishment in their throats.

“Don’t do anything reckless, okay? Even a scratch can be serious if it gets infected!”

Liz brushed Hiro’s cheek with a worried hand. He gave her a long-suffering smile and nodded, well used to her motherly tendencies.

“I know. That’s what our physician is for.”

“You *don’t* know. That’s why I’m telling you. What if you get ambushed by bandits? I know you’re an incredible fighter, but there’s always a chance...”

“Yeah. Right. Got it.” Taken aback by Liz’s intensity, Hiro could only mumble something vague.

“Hey! You aren’t even listening, mister!” Liz puffed out her cheeks in an endearing pout.

Rosa finally took pity on her sister and intervened. “She’s right to warn you,

you know. I won't be made a widow a second time. Not before we're even wed."

"That's right! You can't die before you've wed— Wait, what?!" Liz looked at her sister, aghast.

Rosa laid a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Is something the matter?"

"What do you mean, 'wed'?"

"Oh, you must have misheard me. All this noise, you see. These horses are so terribly loud."

"I guess..."

Perhaps this was Rosa's revenge for being knocked out the previous evening. She watched her younger sister with amusement. "I jest, of course. I am content to remain a mistress."

"A *what*?"

"And I've instilled my darling with such a soft spot for the east. I can't have him dying on me now."

"Ugh, do you *ever* think about anything but coin?"

Hiro let out a deep sigh. This wasn't the first time Rosa had tormented Liz, and it was unlikely to be the last, but he had a strange feeling that if he didn't head off whatever track she was on, he would be the one in danger. He tactfully changed the subject.

"Take care, Liz. You too, Rosa."

Liz turned back to him, her crimson eyes shadowed with nervousness. "Don't worry. I'll do a job you'd be proud of."

"And Rosa, you should make an effort to recruit some capable help."

"I thought you might say that, and I have already reached out to some likely candidates." Rosa patted his shoulder with a reassuring hand. "Rest assured, the world will not fall apart in your absence."

Hiro smiled, assuaged. "Then I suppose I should be goi— Agh!"

All of a sudden, Liz's sculpted face was only inches away. "I'll send our fastest

horse, so you'd better write back. And you've got a long journey ahead of you, so remember to eat." She laid an admonishing finger on his nose. "And I know I said it already, but don't be reckless! There's no shame in running if things get dangerous!"

It was like being lectured by his mother. His jaw set just a little. He opened his mouth to complain that she was being overprotective, but Rosa chose that moment to interrupt.

"I shall return to the east. If you have need of food or coin, tell me and I'll have the local nobles deliver it to you. Even troops, if you require, in confidence from His Majesty. It would be a simple matter to write it off as defending the security of the eastern territories."

"That won't be necessary. You two worry too much."

Hiro had already received funds enough for the road, as well as a bodyguard of one hundred men. His train was well stocked with provisions. A safe journey was all but assured.

"We are ready to depart, Lord Hiro," a gravelly voice intoned as Garda appeared at Hiro's shoulder. His black iron armor hid his warrior's appearance, but it couldn't conceal the sheer might he exuded. He leaned close enough to whisper, "Are you quite certain about this?"

Hiro nodded firmly. "It's Rosa you should be worried about, not me. I need you to escort her back to the east."

It was unlikely that rival factions would take any drastic action, but with Orcus on the prowl, there was no such thing as too much caution.

"Aye, fear not. I'll see the lady safely home."

"Once that's done, could you head back to Berg Fortress and continue training the men?"

"I could. But on one condition."

"Oh?" Hiro cocked his head. Garda wasn't usually so coy.

"You're taking Drix to Lebering, I assume? Then bring Huginn and Muninn too."

Hiro was about to ask why, but Garda beat him to the punch.

“Take it from someone who fought by their side in the Liberation Army—they’re good. They’d give any imperial soldier a run for his money, and they can take care of themselves. I’m sure a man such as you could use them.”

“I can’t. If anything did happen, I might have to leave them to die.”

“Then do it. They know what they’re signing up for. But you’re a fool if you think those two would roll over and die. Give them an order, they’ll see it through.”

Hiro peered through Garda’s eyeslit to find the zlosta’s gaze steely. A will burned within that would not back down. Finally, he relented. “All right. I’ll take them.”

“Good. I’ll let them know. Fair travels.”

As Garda’s figure receded, Hiro turned back to Liz and Rosa. “Remember, Liz, Faerzen is still unstable. Don’t do anything without consulting Aura first.”

“I know. I’ll do exactly as she says. I’d like to think I’m good at commanding, but even I know I’m hopeless at strategy.”

“You’ll learn soon enough. Just remember, don’t get careless.”

“I know. Good luck to you too.”

They embraced, patted each other on the back, then drew apart. Liz broke into a bashful grin at which Hiro couldn’t help but smile. Still, there was no distracting himself from the unease bubbling in his chest.

“I’ll be back from Lebering as soon as I can. In the meantime, don’t do anything irresponsible.”

Liz met his attempt at seriousness with her hands on her hips and a proud sniff. “I’ll be fine. Take a good look while you can, okay? Next time you see me, you won’t even recognize me!”

Hiro chuckled. “I look forward to it.”

As he turned to Rosa, a soft impact struck him in the face. Her arms wrapped around the back of his head. “If you’re ever feeling lonely, send a messenger,”

she crooned in motherly tones. “I’ll come for you anytime.”

“I don’t think the emperor would be happy with me.”

“Perhaps you’d lose your titles, but then I could adopt you into House Kelheit. You’d like that, I’m certain.”

“Never once in my life have I thought that.” Forcing a smile, Hiro pulled away from Rosa. “All right, I should be going.” He turned away and retreated to his carriage.

“We’ve been waitin’, chief!” Muninn opened the door. Hiro thanked the man and stepped through.

Huginn was inside as well. She greeted him with an excited dip of her head.

“It’s an honor to be your bodyguard, Your Lordship!”

The siblings seemed a little overeager, but Hiro said nothing of it as he settled into his seat. He glanced toward the window of the carriage door. Outside, Liz and Rosa waved goodbye.

“They need to stop worrying. I’ll be back in no time.”

He felt no particular elation. His heart was calm. His mind was clear and his thoughts were free. No matter what awaited him in the north, it would not stop him. He would let no one stand in his way.

“Let’s go.”

With a command to the coachman, the carriage creaked into motion.

Chapter 3: Northward Bound

The thirtieth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1023

Five days had passed since leaving the capital. Hiro, the other special envoys, and their hundred guards were well on their way to the northern border.

The north was the territory of House Scharm, the great house that represented the northern nobles. Past Riesenriller, their so-called Whitesteel Castle, bitter air temperatures assailed the land with a brutal cold, but the more southerly regions were comparatively temperate and, as a result, settled. Those regions, with their swathe of fertile black soil, formed the backbone of House Scharm's wealth.

The convoy stopped at the checkpoint known as the Northern Gateway for an inspection before being allowed to continue on their way.

"My apologies for the trouble, Your Highness. I fear no one is exempt from the checks, not even royalty."

"It's all right. You wouldn't be doing a good job if you made exceptions for status."

Hiro glanced to his side, where the checkpoint overseer sat on horseback next to the carriage. The middle-aged man wore furs over his armor to gird against the cold, but they hadn't saved his beard from turning prematurely white.

"I'm glad you understand," he said. Puffing out white clouds, he swung down from his horse and approached the portal. "Raise the gate!" he cried. As his voice faded, a great grinding shook the earth, and the enormous door began to lift.

"There's naught but snow on the other side, but I bid you fair travels nonetheless."

Seeing the genteel old man off with a wave, Hiro and his company passed through the gate and took their first steps into the north proper.

“It’s gorgeous!” came an admiring whisper from Huginn.

“It’s bloody cold, is what it is,” a reply came from somewhere beneath the quivering pile of four furs that was Muninn.

Huginn shot her brother a sharp glance. She leaped nimbly down from the carriage, picked up a pile of snow, and returned. “Eat this and shut up, brother dear.”

“Sister dearest, I think I would die— Mmph?!”

Muninn fell to the ground and rolled around in pain, his throat packed with a fistful of snow.



With only a cold stare to spare for her sibling's suffering, Huginn bounded back to Hiro. "I've never seen snow before, Your Lordship," she exclaimed. "I didn't know anything could be so cold!"

She watched in awe as the handful of white flakes melted in her fingers. Hiro's attention was more on Muninn, who had turned deathly pale.

"Are you sure your brother's all right?" he asked. "He looks like he's dying."

"I've never seen snow before, Your Lordship," she exclaimed. "I didn't know anything could be so cold!"

She repeated herself so perfectly that at first Hiro doubted his ears. He sensed it would be best to drop the subject of Muninn.

"Is this the first time you've left Lichtein?" he asked, deciding to humor her.

"I traveled about a little as a sellsword, but only to Steissen and Draal. Never any farther north."

"Really? Then this must all be new to you." Most people would probably have reacted like Muninn, but it seemed that Huginn's surprisingly girlish love for pretty things had made her forget about the cold.

Hiro and Muninn traded small talk for a while as the convoy made its way along the snow-covered road. After a time, however, it came to a stop. Their way was blocked—and not just by one person, or even two.

"Is this trouble, Your Lordship?" Huginn reached for her weapon, bristling with wariness.

"What do we do, chief?" Muninn's eyes turned steely as he laid a cautious hand on the sword at his belt. Before their caravan, an army stretched as far as the eye could see, keeping silent vigil over the road.

"That's the second prince's flag, if I'm not mistaken." Hiro narrowed his eyes but gestured for the siblings to sheathe their weapons. He shot Drix a meaningful glance.

The man's unease was palpable. "A silver wolf on a white field—unmistakably the livery of the second prince. I see the flags of other powerful nobles as well. Why they are here is anyone's guess, but we would be well advised not to do

anything rash.”

The force’s numbers were too large for a welcome, but it was hard to believe that they were planning anything more hostile. Hiro had expected the second prince to make contact sooner or later, but not to pull a move on this scale.

“Well, we’re not going to learn anything back here,” Hiro said. “We need to get closer.”

“Is that wise, Your Lordship? If they mean you harm...” The unease was plain in Huginn’s voice.

Hiro smiled, hoping to reassure her. “If they meant me harm, they’d have done it already.”

The second prince evidently hadn’t come to spill blood, so they had nothing to fear from approaching, and there was nothing to be gained from a silent standoff. The only way of finding out what was going on was to ask.

“It looks like he’s had the same idea, though,” Hiro observed.

A unit of twenty or so riders had detached from the army to come toward them. The figure in the lead was androgynous but striking in appearance, with heterochromous eyes—the left blue, the right gold—that lent him an air of mystique. His sky-blue hair fell soft as silk over slender shoulders. Silver armor glinted from beneath his covering of brown furs.

The man dismounted with a practiced ease and strode toward Hiro’s company. It was difficult not to notice his kingly bearing or the hands that he laid on the twin blades at his hips. He exhaled white breath and smiled.

“I am Lupus Scharm Selene von Grantz, second prince of the empire,” he announced, “and I have come to greet my new brother.”

Selene’s eyes looked the party over before coming to rest on Hiro. His brow furrowed in recognition.

“Black hair and black eyes—the mark of the twinblack. I must say, I doubted whether it truly existed, yet here you are in the flesh.”

Hiro disembarked and approached Selene with an outstretched hand. “Hiro Schwartz von Grantz. It’s a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.”

The second prince nodded in approval as he accepted the handshake. “You have manners. That’s good. I’m pleased to have such a polite little brother.” He paused. “Did you know your exploits ring loud enough to reach me here in the north?”

Hiro’s lips curled with just a touch of wryness. “I don’t know what you’ve heard, but those kinds of stories tend to get more exaggerated every time they’re told.”

“You don’t have to be so modest, you know. I’ve seen the strategies you used against Lichtein.”

“I was just lucky, that’s all. Even I’m astonished that things worked out as well as they did.”

“Of course you were. Who could have predicted the convenient demise of General von Kilo?” Selene’s tone was breezy, but his eyes flashed dangerously as he wrapped an arm around Hiro’s shoulders. “But this is no conversation to have out here in the cold. Perhaps we could continue at greater lengths in your carriage?”

“I’d love to, but I have urgent business in Lebering. Might we save it for another time?”

“Never fear. I am quite aware of your current position as special envoy. I realize that your schedule is strict. No, I am not here to waylay you, but to accompany you.”

“We’ll move slowly with an army of this size in tow.” Hiro gestured to the troops stretching across the snowfields. Even at a rough count, they easily numbered more than thirty thousand.

“That will not be a concern. I will take only twenty men.”

“I can’t promise you much in the way of hospitality. It’ll be a cold journey, and we won’t exactly be eating like nobles.”

“I am used to the cold, I assure you. More so than you, I suspect. And I would be a poor commander if I turned up my nose at army rations.”

Selene half-marched Hiro back to the carriage, where they both got in. He

offered brief greetings to Huginn and Muninn, but his face lit up with delight when he saw the carriage's final occupant.

"Why, Drix! It has been far too long. Is your lord father keeping well?"

The siblings turned to Drix in astonishment. Hiro was not surprised—he had surmised that Drix was from the north—but he kept silent on that point.

Drix lowered his eyes awkwardly, but he nonetheless offered Selene a polite bow. "Lord Graeci is in good health, but he misses your company dreadfully. Perhaps you might visit him in the capital sometime."

"Visit that stuffy old place? What good could that ever do me?" With a dismissive wave, the prince took a seat next to Hiro. "Stovell is there, for one, and the central nobles are disagreeable to a man. Far better to roam the snowfields wild and free than tangle myself up in all their politics, wouldn't you say?" The man turned to Hiro with a cheeky eyebrow raised, seeking agreement.

"You're still fifth in line to the throne," Hiro said. "Like it or not, you're part of politics. Ignore it and it'll only come back to bite you."

Indeed, the second prince was fifth in line to the throne, not second—a position that reflected his indifference to the central territories and refusal to leave the north. He seemed to have no interest in being bound by imperial succession, and he demonstrated as much by living life as he pleased.

"You speak like a man who aspires to become emperor," Selene remarked.

"I..." Hiro's answer caught in his throat.

Seeing as much, Selene continued. "The Grantzian Empire has achieved all it can. It may stand on shaky foundations, but it has persisted for a thousand long years. Over the centuries, it has tasted prosperity, lethargy, decline, and stagnation...and now, it has little left to accomplish." He raised two fingers and wagged them. "Now the starving lion roams the land in search of prey, with two choices before it: it can devour the world to fill its belly, or it can succumb to hunger and die. And I suspect it will do the latter."

A bold declaration. The carriage fell silent as the implications of the prince's words sank in. Selene looked around, seemingly pleased by their astonishment.

“The owner of this decrepit lion may still hold great power,” he continued in more impassioned tones, “but that power would hinge on the support of the masses. They would rule beholden to their nobles. Spend their lives kowtowing to lesser men. I have no interest in such a pathetic kind of kingship.”

“You should be careful who you say that to,” Hiro warned him.

Selene’s words would win him the enmity of most of the central nobles, but the man didn’t seem to care. His grin seemed almost cheerful.

“And what should I care if the central nobles know what I think?” He spoke not with arrogance, but with absolute confidence. “Let them challenge me. I will meet them with two hundred thousand men—the Fifth Legion and all the forces of the north.”

The prince’s words quietly reinforced that he held the northern territories in his grasp. That was true strength. He didn’t need to bluff or bluster in order to intimidate, only state the truth. The palpable power emanating from him took everyone’s breath away but Hiro’s.

“But perhaps I have spoken a little forcefully. Forgive me. I meant only to assure you that I have no interest in the throne.” Selene patted Hiro on the back before turning to gaze out of the window. “We ought to make camp. The north only gets colder once the sun goes down...and all sorts of monsters come out at night.”

His eyes returned to Hiro and narrowed sharply, like those of a stalking wolf catching sight of its prey.

*

Making camp took longer than expected. Some of that time was taken up by erecting bonfires and palisades to ward off monsters, but the lion’s share of the delay stemmed from the cold, which numbed the hands and impeded work. By the time all was done, the sun had set, and there was only time for a brief dinner before guard duty began.

As the soldiers assigned to patrol donned their winterwear, rubbing their hands together to ward off the chill, Hiro lay down on the snow and gazed at the stars. Huginn and Muninn had spent most of the evening by his side,

insisting that they were his bodyguards, but had eventually retreated to the warmth of the tent.

“Lord Hiro, you must return inside. You will catch your death out here.” Occasionally, a concerned soldier would ask him to go back to his tent. This was the fifth.

“In a moment,” he replied. “I want to watch the stars for a while.” With the Black Camellia around his shoulders and the blessing of Excalibur to warm him, the cold could not touch him. Warmth enfolded him like a sunlit spring day.

“If you’re certain, sir. But you ought to be quick.” The soldier returned to his watch, glancing dubiously over his shoulder as he went.

Hiro had just leaned back once more when a sudden voice called out to him.

“A stargazer, are we?”

He sat up and turned to see Selene.

“Do pardon me for interrupting. I’m sure you value your solitude, but I’d hoped for a chance to speak in confidence.” The prince took a seat beside him. “So? Do you enjoy watching the stars?”

“I do. I have for a long time.”

“I’ve never liked them much, myself. They’re pretty to look at, no doubt about that, but they twinkle only for a brief while. I can never bring myself to love them. They feel too ephemeral for that.” Selene stretched a hand toward the sky. Suddenly, he seemed very far away. “As do you. You seem like a man balancing on the edge of a knife.”

“What makes you think that? You don’t know anything about me.”

“Oh, but I do. The north is awash with whispers of you. About how you punished the units who burned villages in Lichtein. About how you levy justice against any who mistreat their prisoners, even nobility. The strictness of your command has become quite legendary among my nobles.” Selene lowered his eyes sadly. “And yet, that seems like no easy road. To dedicate yourself to your people, your country, your loved ones... It all sounds terribly noble, but a life lived for others has little room left for oneself.”

“That’s the burden of royalty, if you ask me. Or anyone who rules.”

“You see? That’s what I mean. Everything’s so clear-cut to you. No room anywhere for contradiction or compromise.” The prince stood, stretched, and heaved a sigh. “I can only hope you don’t make the same mistakes as Mars. He was an idealist, just like you, but they say that very purity of heart was what broke him in the end.”

That was a chapter of the legend lost to history. A black stain on the tale of Mars that should have been expunged one thousand years ago.

“I can’t say I know the details, but they say that something happened that changed him. His strategies turned cruel and he became ruthless in his conquests.” Selene’s voice took on a sorrowful timbre as he gazed at the night sky. “And they came to call him the Lord of Carnage. The name changed over time, of course, and now other lands lie awake at night in fear of the Desperation.”

Hiro opened his mouth to ask how the prince knew all that, but he thought better of it. *He’s just as abnormal as I am*, he thought, *and someday, he might end up standing in my way*. In which case, better not to show weakness.

“Or perhaps it’s all fiction,” Selene concluded. “Who’s to say? In any case, consider this fair warning. And now, I ought to retire.”

Until Selene vanished into the darkness, Hiro’s gaze never moved from the twin blades on his hips. “If losing means sacrificing something I hold dear...” he whispered under his breath, “then I’d prefer to never know defeat.”

With that, he stood and set out for his tent. Warm air greeted him as he stepped inside. His black eyes picked out two human shapes in the half-light—Huginn and Muninn, both sprawled out near the tent flap. He smiled fondly to see them fast asleep before slipping beneath his own blanket.

Soon, he too was snoring. As he fell into a deep slumber, something stirred at his breast. The card tucked away in his pocket—the one given to him by Artheus—began to spew a misty darkness. Unseen and unknown, the air filled with black fog. It coiled around the sleeping Hiro’s limbs, then surged suddenly outward...

And swallowed up the world.

*

Pitiless rain drenched the clifftop. The droplets scattered as they struck the stone, bursting into spray that seeped into the soil. Black clouds shrouded the hollow sky, blotting out the light of the moon.

“This can’t be real! Why?! Why did it have to be you?!”

A young boy’s rain-soaked sorrow rang through the empty night. A woman lay limp in his arms. Her lovely golden hair was smeared with mud and robbed of its luster, and her face was the ashen gray of a corpse. A rivulet of blood trickled from her purple lips.

The boy wrenched out the spear that had impaled her and unleashed a scream at the sky.

“Why is this happening?! Tell me!”

The black clouds had no answer to give, only the rumble of thunder and the burgeoning hiss of the deluge.

“What did she do to deserve this?! What did she ever do wrong?!”

He drew her body close and wailed into her cold chest. Belated apologies slipped from his lips, bitter tears falling at his failure to save her.

“My king, I beg you. This is no time to weep. She of all people would not see you falter now!”

The voice issued from behind him, from one of the five generals kneeling at his back. Its source shuddered—not because of the cold, nor the rain, but because of the murderous glare from the boy-king that abruptly speared his body.

“My king, stay your anger, I beg you. You must not allow this to cloud your judgment.”

“I know, Lox. I know. But I’m perfectly calm. Even I’m surprised by how calm I am.”

The woman’s body had unaccountably vanished from the boy’s arms. Only a

black blade now lay in his grasp. The sight struck the five generals dumb with astonishment, but the boy's voice soon recalled them from their stupor.

"They call this a peaceful resolution? Hah. We come to negotiate in good faith, and this is how they repay us."

Lox froze where he knelt. The boy had risen to his feet—and he was *smiling*. Even as tears trickled from his eyes, a faint grin played across his lips. A more ghastly sight, the general had never seen.

"Let them learn whose anger they have roused. Let every last one of them know the enemy they have made."

"You cannot mean...? My king, you mustn't!"

"I know what you want to say, Lox, only too well. But this is beyond debate."

"Have mercy on them, I beg you! I beg you, Lord Schwartz!"

Lox's pleas rang uselessly in the boy's ears as he walked away. He stopped only when he reached the edge of the cliff. Below, one hundred thousand men awaited his orders.

"Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars!"

They cheered his name when they saw him, the clatter of metal filling the air as they pounded their swords against their shields. Once, the sight would have filled him with zeal. Now, he felt only emptiness.

"Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars!"

The light left his eyes as a bottomless sorrow came over him. Never again would his heart run over. Now it would wither until it was an empty husk.

"The path of kingship is closed to me now. Only the path of conquest is left."

The boy raised his black blade high, then swept it down, leveling it at the horizon as he issued his royal decree.

"My loyal Crow Legion, I command you—slake my thirst with the blood of my enemies!"

His smile twisted cruelly as the tip of his sword skewered the enemy capital.

"Kill them all!"

*

Hiro slept poorly following his conversation with Selene. Dreams of bloodshed plagued him, events of which he had no memory but that were all the more terrifying for it.

He opened his heavy eyelids to the familiar view outside the window. The land was covered in white, carpeted in snow. He squinted against the glare as the snowfields caught the sunlight, intensifying it in their reflection.

It was the ninth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1023. True to schedule, Hiro and his company had crossed the border into the kingdom of Lebering. They were currently stopped a short distance away, close to a checkpoint.

“This is where I must say farewell,” Selene said. “Our time together was brief, but I enjoyed it all the same.”

“As did I,” Hiro replied. “It’s been a pleasure.”

“I will be watching with great anticipation to see what path you take.”

The second prince’s words struck him as oddly portentous, but he bit his tongue.

“Allow me to give you this, in the hope that it will bring you luck.”

On the point of stepping out of the carriage, Selene produced a crimson blossom.

“An anat, it’s called. A singular flower that blooms only in the north.” Seemingly oblivious to Hiro’s surprise, he mounted his horse and turned it about. “May we meet again, Lord Hiro. I hope to someday welcome you to the gleaming walls of Riesenriller.”

With that, he vanished as gallantly as he had first arrived. Hiro looked away from the man’s receding figure and down at the anat in his hand with a sigh.

“Blooms only in the north, huh?”

“Are you quite all right, Your Lordship?” Huginn’s voice was filled with worry. “You’re looking a little peaky.”

Hiro shook his head. “Sorry. It’s nothing. Let’s go.” He stowed the crimson flower in his pocket and issued a command to the coachman. Soon, they were once again in motion.

When at last they reached the Lebering checkpoint, they found an unexpected sight awaiting them.

“Special envoys of the Grantzian Empire, allow me to welcome you to Lebering. You have journeyed long and far from the imperial capital. Please allow me and my men to escort you the rest of the way.”

The man was visibly taller and broader than a human, and his armor-clad form marked him as a seasoned warrior. His pale skin made it clear that his zlosta blood ran thin, but the raw mana that radiated from him seemed bottomless.

“I am Haniel van Wenzel of the Three Asuras,” he announced. “Holder of the seat of Schützer, the Asura of Protection.”

The Three Asuras were Lebering’s defenders, reputedly the strongest warriors in the land. Their extraordinary strength was known as far south as the Duchy of Lichtein.

Haniel knelt before Hiro and drew his sword. He raised it above his head, left hand gripping the hilt, right hand laid flat against the blade. “It is an honor to meet the scion of the same War God this land’s great founder once served.”

“And I’m no less honored to meet one of the famed Three Asuras.” Hiro gestured for Haniel to be at ease.

The man slipped his sword back into its sheath and rose to his feet. Hiro gave him a good-natured smile before glancing down at the blade on his belt.

“Am I right in thinking that must be your Relic?”

Each of the Three Asuras was entrusted with a Relic, a weapon of great historical importance that they were charged to employ in the defense of Lebering.

“Indeed it is. The fiendblade Hauteclair.” Haniel patted the sword’s hilt proudly. Embedded in its pommel was a weighty amethyst—a manastone.

Immediately, Hiro could tell that this was the source of the mana that so infused Haniel.

“What an unusual design,” he observed. The sword bore three depressions: one on either side of the cross guard and a larger one in the center.

“Hauteclaire is the oldest of the Relics,” Haniel explained. “Its construction retains elements that have since fallen into disuse.”

“Interesting.” Hiro’s eyes narrowed, but he said no more. Apparently, Haniel had never seen Hauteclaire in its full glory. Hiro, however, remembered the sight well. He would not soon forget the cherished blade of his erstwhile comrade, Lox.

But that’s not for me to reveal. If this is how things are in today’s world, it’s not my place to change it.

If knowledge of Hauteclaire’s true form had not survived the centuries, revealing it would only invite needless strife. Hiro had no intention of plunging the land his old friend had built into chaos.

The conversation had fallen silent, so Haniel filled in the lull. “His Majesty looks forward to receiving you, Your Highness. I apologize for hurrying you, but we ought to be away. Shall we?”

“Of course. We’re ready to depart at any time.”

Hiro glanced at Drix, who nodded. One by one, the officials’ carriages trundled through the checkpoint. He returned to his own carriage, where Huginn and Muninn awaited, and ordered the coachman to set out once more.

“The weather is kind to us today,” Haniel said through the window. “I should expect to arrive at the royal city by dusk at the latest.”

“Thank you for seeing us there.”

“You will travel safe in my keeping, my lord; that I swear. For now, I must excuse myself.”

As Haniel departed, Drix turned to Hiro. “A personal escort from one of the Asuras. Lebering offers us a royal welcome.”

“As they should!” Huginn interrupted. “Mars’s heir deserves a little respect!”

The ex-sellsword seemed to raise her hackles against everybody but Hiro, and she wasn't good at hiding it. With her natural talent on top of that, many wouldn't hesitate to call her impertinent.

At any rate, that thought certainly seemed to pass through Drix's mind as he glared at her with displeasure. "Might I suggest that you speak in a manner more befitting of a lady—"

"You can cram it, is what you can do! I answer to no one but His Lordship and the boss!"

"My dear, may I remind you that you are speaking to a superior officer?"

"You ain't *my* superior anything! I'm in His Lordship's employ, remember?"

Drix fell silent, grinding his teeth. Beside him, Muninn bowed his head in silent embarrassment.

Hiro decided to move the conversation along before things got awkward. "Well," he said, "they don't necessarily believe me as much as it looks like."

"What do you mean?" Huginn cocked her head in bemusement.

Hiro lowered his voice. "The Asuras aren't the kind of figures you'd usually find escorting officials. They have enormous support among the people, as well as the confidence of the king. They're on the same level as heads of state. If Lebering had only expected a caravan of officials, they would have sent somebody with a more suitable rank to welcome us."

Drix picked up Hiro's point. "But if Mars's heir—and a prince of the empire, no less—really was visiting, it would only be proper to send a head of state to receive him. Any less would risk causing offense."

"Exactly."

Treating a member of the Grantzian royal family with disrespect would not only inflame the citizens of the empire, it would risk inviting reprisal from other nations as well. Lebering was currently looking forward to its princess's coming-of-age ceremony. Putting a damper on the celebrations would be the last thing it would want.

"It looks like we can expect a warm welcome. Now we just have to hope all

this concludes without any unpleasant surprises.”

Hiro turned to look out of the window. The snowscape outside passed by in slow silence, but it did nothing to calm the growing murmur of disquiet in his chest.

*

Another half hour passed in silence but for the rumbling of the wheels before the ominous clouds at last gave in. Snow began to fall. The wind picked up to beat at the window, and the temperature within the carriage dropped rapidly. All but Hiro searched about for their furs as the cold became unbearable.

It was then that they noticed a disturbance. A sudden commotion had arisen outside. Strangely, the imperial soldiers seemed unconcerned. Whatever was happening, it was occurring among the Lebering forces.

“Please do not trouble yourselves, honored guests!” came Haniel’s command. “Naught is amiss!”

It was only human for that kind of reassurance to make someone more curious. Leaving the other three behind, Hiro ventured outside and set out for the head of the column, where the noise was loudest. The Lebering soldiers looked taken aback by seeing him pass, but as a special envoy—and the fourth prince besides—they seemed to judge it improper to do any more than stare.

It’s been a long time since I’ve walked on fallen snow.

The white carpet crunched pleasantly underfoot. Light of step, exhaling white fog, Hiro reached the front of the column.

The sight that greeted him struck him dumb.

Gruesome red soaked the snowfields. A young girl stood absently by the roadside, holding a bloodstained sword. Around her, five corpses lay carved to pieces. They had been bandits, judging by the sorry pieces of armor strapped to their muscular bodies, although nothing else remained to explain their demise—nothing but the clear truth that their end had come by the girl’s hand.

“Lady Claudia! What are you doing here?! And alone, no less!”

As soon as a flustered Haniel saw that the girl was unharmed, he wasted no

time in scolding her, but she seemed nonplussed. She giggled into the back of her hand.

“Because I snuck out of the castle, of course. And then these brigands accosted me.”

Her waist-length purple hair shimmered in the wind. She seemed too fair for the bloodbath around her; with gentle eyes, a shapely nose, and plump lips brushed with the faintest pink, her delicate features were as ephemeral as they were beautiful. Most remarkable of all, her skin was white as snow. At a glance, Hiro knew that this was the Vernesse, Lebering’s famed Princess of Amethyst.

“We really ought to review the security of our roads,” Claudia continued. “Imagine what might have happened if a merchant caravan had happened by— Oh?” She stopped as she noticed Hiro staring blankly and turned her violet eyes on him. “And who might you be?”

She tossed her bloodstained sword away and stepped closer. With an elegant smile, she dipped into a curtsy.

“You may call me Claudia van Lebering, first princess of the kingdom of Lebering.”

She raised her head, only to freeze as she caught her first proper glimpse of Hiro. Blind to the change in her demeanor, he extended his hand.

“Hiro Schwartz von Grantz, fourth prince of the Grantzian Empire.”

“Do excuse me,” Claudia said, regaining her bearings. “I was astonished by how closely you resemble the rumors. The twinblack is just as I had imagined.” She cleared her throat and took his hand in hers, her cheeks reddening bashfully as she looked at him with upturned eyes. “Forgive me for imposing, but...might you escort me back to the royal city?”

Hiro could hardly abandon a princess to return home on foot. He could only agree.

Claudia’s eyes positively sparkled as he nodded in assent. “How can I ever repay you? Please, you must tell me all about yourself along the way!”

All but glowing, she dashed away in the direction of Hiro’s carriage. Haniel

turned to him.

“I must apologize, Your Highness. Princess Claudia can be...willful, shall we say.”

“I don’t mind. The more the merrier as far as travel is concerned.”

Haniel opened his mouth to reply, but at that moment, a rider pulled up behind him.

“My lord,” the man reported, “a messenger has arrived.”

“What?”

Haniel pulled the man aside. The pair whispered back and forth for a while. Eventually, Haniel turned back to Hiro, looking shaken.

“I had hoped to escort you to the royal city, Your Highness, but I fear a matter has arisen which requires my urgent attention. I leave Princess Claudia in your care. Now, I must ride!”

The Asura exchanged some final words with Claudia, then peeled off from the column with an escort of a dozen riders. Soon, they were galloping across the snowfields and out of sight.



Claudia bowed apologetically to Hiro as he returned to the carriage. “I’m terribly sorry about all of this. It seems that there is some disturbance in Haniel’s lands.”

Her face betrayed a deep concern. Hiro shook his head and offered her a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, I’d hoped that you could tell me a bit about Lebering.”

“Why, I’d love to! There’s ever so much to like! Shall we begin with the royal city?”

Claudia’s lips blossomed into a wide smile as she launched into an enthusiastic lecture on Lebering’s capital.

Lebering’s royal city of Tiane was also the kingdom’s largest fortress. Designed—as its moniker of the Bastion of Violet Flakes implied—to safeguard its people from invaders, its defenses were impenetrable. Its innermost confines lay within two sets of battlements, themselves ringed by a great moat passable only by way of a retractable drawbridge. The buildings of the castle town, limned in white by a fresh dusting of snow, possessed a solemn beauty. If only the sun had been shining, its glittering charms would surely have captured any onlooker’s heart.

The king’s palace was Tiare, the Amethyst Hall, which overlooked the town from atop the central hill. Hiro and his company disembarked before its doors, whereupon Claudia led them to the throne room.

An extravagant chandelier hung from the ceiling of the chamber, bathing it in light. Hiro proceeded beneath it along the red carpet laid across the middle of the floor. Officials followed along behind, carrying gifts. The gazes of the Lebering nobles fell upon him from either side, but he strode ahead undaunted. His confidence must have impressed them, as more than a few admiring exhalations issued from the crowd.

After a short distance, he stopped and sank to one knee in a Grantzian bow. “I am honored to have received your invitation, Your Majesty.”

“And I am honored that you are here,” the king replied. “Svarov van Lebering greets you. My ancestor, Lox, would smile to see me welcome a scion of the War God to my halls.”

“As would mine. Would you accept these meager tokens of my gratitude?”

Hiro gestured to the officials, who laid their gifts out before the throne.

“You have my thanks. I trust that you will convey my appreciation to His Majesty, Emperor Greiheit.” The corners of the king’s eyes crinkled as he smiled. “If I may, Lord Hiro: are you wed?”

“I... Pardon?”

“Why, but this is some kind of serendipity. If you have no wife and no betrothed, perhaps you would consider a union with my house.”

As Hiro fell to thinking how best to politely refuse, a figure beside the throne stepped forward.

Oh?

His eyes and Hiro’s only met for a fraction of a second, but that was enough to sound alarms in Hiro’s head. Jealousy, hatred, murder—every dark passion of which the human heart was capable raked over him in that gaze. His own eyes narrowed in response...but then the young man turned to the king with an unctuous smile, and the moment passed.

“I think this subject might be better broached another time, Father. Lord Hiro is tired from his journey. It would not be fair to keep him from his bed.”

This could only be Flaus van Lebering, the king’s firstborn son and heir apparent. He would be thirty this year, well into adulthood for a human, but still looked to be in the prime of youth. His zlost blood must have run thick.

“You are right, of course,” King Svarov said. He nodded firmly, as though settling the matter in his mind, and returned his attention to Hiro. “Very well, Lord Hiro, the rest of the day is yours to do with as you please. But I do hope to see you at my dear daughter’s banquet on the morrow.”

“I would be honored to attend.”

With a final bow of his head, Hiro turned away and retreated. He departed

the throne room to the nobles' applause.

With a servant's guidance, Hiro made his way to a guest room in the depths of the Amethyst Hall. He took a seat at the writing desk and produced two pieces of paper from his pocket: a diagram of Lebering's social structure and a report from imperial spies investigating the kingdom.

"It's been a thousand years, Lox," he said to himself, "but your nation might be on the brink of a revolution."

King Svarov was weak. He was not a despotic ruler, but neither was he a particularly wise one. He was a thoroughly middling man in all respects, devoid even of enough authority to compel loyalty. One meeting had been enough to determine that he lacked a king's gravitas.

"Not many people will follow a king like that. Even his own son doesn't respect him."

Flaus's earlier glance played back in his mind's eye. He had only ever felt a gaze like that on the battlefield—an ambitious brand of haughtiness peculiar to those who had grown up getting their own way.

"Leaving Svarov in charge of the nation would be too risky, and having Flaus succeed him would be downright dangerous. Which means the only option left is..."

A reserved knock on the door interrupted his scheming.

"Excuse me, Your Highness." Drix entered, his expression taut and grave.

"I take it the news isn't good," Hiro said.

"Your assessment is correct. One might be forgiven for thinking that war had already broken out. The troop movements involved are far too sizable for the banquet's attendants to account for."

Drix had been busy making contact with the imperial agents in Lebering. He produced a report from his pocket and handed it to Hiro. "Soldiers are arriving from every region in the kingdom. Their numbers now exceed ten thousand, and we only expect them to grow."

“They’re here to honor the princess with large-scale military exercises...or at least, that’s the pretext.” Hiro finished skimming the paper and leaned back in his chair. “Do you know who’s organizing all this?”

“Baal van Bittenia, one of the Three Asuras. He has held his post since the old king’s day. King Svarov trusts him implicitly and he commands enormous support among the people.”

So, soldiers were gathering in the capital, summoned by a loyal confidant. The king would likely not suspect a thing until it was too late.

“But what does this Baal want? It can’t be the crown. This started too recently for that.”

According to the report, Baal had only begun setting events in motion several weeks prior. If he wasn’t interested in proclaiming himself king, perhaps he was plotting an attack on the empire, but that would be foolhardy to say the least. The northern territories’ standing army was said to number one hundred thousand men. In peacetime, Lebering could muster thirty thousand at best, fifty if they resorted to conscription.

“Perhaps he could coordinate with the Faerzen Resistance, but mounting an invasion would still be reckless. None of the other nations would side with him.”

If any of the surrounding nations had ever had designs on the empire, Lichtein’s rapid surrender would have made them think twice. Besides, Liz was leading an effort to subdue Faerzen at that very moment. Once she joined forces with Aura, the resistance would quickly fold.

“Still, there’s no such thing as too cautious.” Hiro settled on a course of action and looked back up toward the door. “Huginn, Muninn, are you there?”

The siblings quickly entered. Their expressions were stiff. Clearly, they had noticed the tension in the room.

“Second Tribune Drix, keep working with our spies. Find out more about this Baal van Bittenia.”

Huginn and Muninn knelt as Hiro’s gaze swept toward them. They audibly swallowed.

“In the meantime, there’s something I need you two to do for me...”

Chapter 4: Like Embers, Huddled in the Blizzard

The tenth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1023

The day of the celebration was bitterly cold. Clouds obscured the sun's rise in the eastern sky, impeding its light from spreading across the land. A fierce wind wailed like a howling beast as it beat at the walls of buildings and whipped freshly fallen snow into flurries. Typically, the high street would be bustling with shoppers and lined with stalls, but now it was empty and the shops were shuttered. The commonfolk were all holed up in their homes, hands over their hearths and prayers on their lips, waiting for the snowstorm to pass.

The Amethyst Hall could not have been more different. Its interior was bathed in warmth. Light scattered throughout the great hall, illuminating faces flushed with cheer. A vast selection of dishes adorned twenty long tables, perhaps more, while silver goblets caught the light of the chandelier to trace mesmerizing patterns on the walls. Nobles sat around the tables, conversing merrily with wine glasses in hand.

"A blizzard on a day like today? A blasted shame is what it is."

"Is it so lamentable? Who's to say it isn't a sign of the heavens' favor?"

"Quite. Do they not say that a great cataclysm split the land on the day we zlostas were born?"

"True enough. It may very well be a good omen."

"It must be, for today we celebrate Princess Claudia's sixteenth birthday!"

No sooner was the princess's name spoken than all eyes converged on where she sat beside the king.

"I daresay her beauty could rival that of the empire's sixth princess."

"Is that so? And have you seen the Valditte to compare?"

"Oh my, no. But the rumors paint a very pretty picture."

Holding his plate amidst the nobles and their gossip, Hiro surveyed the room.

Things seem peaceful...for now.

Above his head, an orchestra played an elegant melody on an open balcony. Along the fringes of the room, royal guards stood in bulky armor, weapons on full display as if to assure the attendants that all was secure.

“Lord Hiro,” came a voice. “You seem rather unenthusiastic.”

“Not at all,” he replied.

The man who had spoken was one of the officials who had accompanied him from the empire. Hiro forced a smile to fend him off and downed his glass of water. In a room where everybody was indulging in drink, it felt awkward to be the only one refraining.

“Lord Hiro,” another voice called out. “You are enjoying yourself, I hope?”

This speaker was a slender, foppish man: Flaus van Lebering. With an extravagant cloak draped over his shoulders, he projected a stately air. His features had the hard lines of maturity, but his build could have been that of a boy.

Hiro gave a nod of acknowledgment. “Prince Flaus. I’m having a wonderful time, I assure you.”

“Are you certain? From where I stood, you seemed awfully bored.” Flaus’s tone was jovial. He drained his wine glass, then strode over to the table and returned with the bottle. “Come, let us drink. Our great founder would weep to see you frown so.”

Just as Flaus was about to pour, Hiro shook his head. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t drink.”

“Really? How unfortunate.” Flaus sniffed. “Perhaps I will be able to persuade you another time.”

Hiro changed the subject. “I was wondering, is all this security really necessary? This is only a banquet.”

For just a second, the crown prince’s face twisted into a hostile scowl. “With one of the Grantzian royal family in attendance, we cannot be too cautious,” he said with a sweep of his arms to punctuate the point. “We have one thousand

soldiers on guard around the palace and over one hundred in this very room.”

The prince craned his neck and looked around. On the first floor, the royal guards lining the walls scanned the crowd for intruders. On the second, sentries kept watch in teams of two from behind the orchestra. The hall was thoroughly secure.

He nodded in satisfaction and patted Hiro gently on the shoulder. “Rest assured, you are quite safe. The Asuras themselves have taken charge of security tonight. Not even a mouse will sneak into the hall without their knowledge.”

“So if something does go wrong, nobody outside will know.”

“Nothing that could slip their notice would be worth knowing.” Flaus flashed a defiant grin.

At that moment, a cheer went up from their right as the ornate doors to the corridor outside swung open.

“It seems our living legend has arrived,” Flaus remarked as a tall man approached. “I’m glad you’re here. Is our security all in order?”

“Not a hair out of place.” The newcomer rested a hand on the hilt of his sword as he spoke. Hiro could not help but notice the large amethyst embedded in its pommel.

Now that takes me back. It’s been a long time since I last saw that manastone.

Its size and shape matched the manastone of one of the zlostas who had ruled their race one thousand years prior. Hiro remembered it well. He had cut off its owner’s head with his own sword.

“Lord Hiro, allow me to present a hero of Lebering: Sir Garius van Sarzand of the Three Asuras.”

“A pleasure. Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.” Hiro held out his hand.

Garius gladly accepted the handshake. “So you are this scion of Mars that has set the continent talking!” he exclaimed. “Even in this far-flung land, the people whisper that you are your forebear’s match on the battlefield.”

“Rumors have a way of getting exaggerated. You shouldn’t take them

seriously.”

“Please, you needn’t be so modest. I would relish the opportunity to spar with you!”

Garius seemed ready to draw his sword at that very moment. Hiro had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

“That will do, Garius.” Flaus stepped in. “Lord Hiro does not want to entertain your whims. More importantly, is the hall secure?”

Garius drew away from Hiro with a scowl of disappointment. “Not a single ruffian would dare try their luck.”

“Excellent. Dare I ask what the Three Asuras are doing here? I know how you disdain celebrations.”

“I was struck by a rare urge to enjoy myself. Although it seems that *he* was set on coming from the start.”

Garius’s eyes flicked to someone in the crowd. The man cut an unsettling figure, leaning motionlessly against the wall. With his hood pulled low, his features were impossible to discern.

“Baal van Bittenia,” Flaus whispered, seeing Hiro’s wary gaze. “The Frumenti—the Asura of Wisdom, that is—and the wielder of the fiendbow Failnaught.”

“So that’s him...”

As Hiro nodded in acknowledgment, a loud note blared from the orchestra. A ripple passed through the room as they switched from graceful melody to dramatic bombast.

“How time flies. I must give my regards to my father.” Flaus snorted and downed a mouthful of wine. He stood still for a moment, then slammed his goblet back down onto the table. “Would you join me, Lord Hiro?”

“Of course. I was just thinking that I should greet him myself.”

The two set off through the crowd. Hiro glanced at Flaus’s face, but he couldn’t glean any hint of what the man was thinking.

As they were about to ascend the steps to the throne, Flaus spoke once more.

“Tell me, Lord Hiro, what do you think of Lebering?”

“It seems like a pleasant place. The people seem happy and the king is just. Maybe it could stand to be a little warmer, but that’s all.”

“It is pleasant, isn’t it?” With a faintly jaded smile, Flaus came to a stop. “You should be the first to give the king your regards. I will wait until you are done.”

“Very well. Later, perhaps.”

With a polite nod by way of answer, Hiro made his way up the rest of the steps alone. He reached the top to see the king on his throne. Princess Claudia sat at her father’s side, wearing an elegant smile.

“Ah, Lord Hiro!” the king cried. “I am pleased to see you here!” He flung his arms wide in welcome. Hiro guessed he had already begun drinking.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting for so long. It is a great honor to be invited.”

“Oh, please, enough with the formalities. All I care to know is whether you are enjoying yourself.”

“I am. I’ve been having a wonderful time.”

“Good, good,” the king replied. “I hope that, just for today, you can forget about your duties and have a little fun.”

“I would be glad to. May the friendship between the Grantzian Empire and Lebering be long and fruitful.”

Hiro gave a small bow and turned away. From the corner of his eye, he saw Claudia return the gesture. As he strode away from the throne, Flaus passed him by. The crown prince’s face was twisted with naked anger, his eyes glaring at the king with a piercing intensity.

Seized by a sudden premonition, Hiro thought to turn around, but—

“Ah, Flaus! I must say, this banquet of yours has been a roaring success!”

“I am pleased to hear it, Father. Anything to honor my dear Claudia...and, of course, to impress upon our guests the glory of Lebering.”

“Indeed. Lord Hiro told me that he has found it wonderful.”

The cheerful exchange convinced Hiro that he must have imagined it. He continued back down the steps.

In that instant, everything went awry.

Something heavy thudded to the floor behind him. The sickening squelch produced an unpleasant dissonance with the elegant playing of the orchestra.

“Wha—?”

Hiro swung around to see...

“You were neither a wise king, Father, nor a tyrant. You were simply a mediocre man. And in a time of peace, that would have been enough.”

Flaus stood over the king’s headless body with a bloodstained sword in his hand. Tension spread throughout the hall, weighing heavier and heavier in the air as more nobles realized that something was amiss.

“But the coming age will be no time of peace. We will not have the luxury of living on the empire’s leash. We zlostas must learn to stand alone. I do only what I must, and though it breaks my heart...I know that you would understand.”

Flaus’s mouth twisted into a crazed grin. He laid a hand over his face, bending over almost double as he burst out laughing.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! Oh, the joy this brings me! At last, the throne is mine!” His head swiveled to regard Hiro with bloodshot eyes. “Aha ha...ha. Lord Hiro. You’re still here, I see. You look shocked. Are you shocked?”

The prince bent over backward, laughing like a madman. A scream tore its way from Claudia’s throat as she cradled the king’s body in her arms, but as she howled, shrieks from the nobles drowned her out. Hiro wheeled around to see that the royal guards were laying into them with their swords. In an instant, the throne room had turned from a tranquil gathering to a massacre.

“Kings, fathers...all just rotten meat once they’re dead, aren’t they? No better than livestock. Don’t you agree, Claudia?”

“Brother! I suspected you had ambitions, but this?!”

“If you would blame anything, blame your own deluded notions. It was you who forced my hand. You who overstepped your bounds!”

“You truly are an incurable fool.”

“Let us see which of us is the fool.” Flaus stalked up to Claudia and grabbed her roughly by the hair, eliciting a cry of pain from the princess. “Not to worry. You might no longer have Father, but you still have me. While I cannot allow you to run free, nor will I keep you in a cage.”

Claudia whimpered in fear.

“Leave everything to me. I’ll be gentle, I promise.” Flaus grinned a lecherous grin. Eyes burning with lust, he wrenched Claudia to her feet, wrapped an arm about her slender waist, and pulled her close. “Nothing can part us now. We’ll be—”

His words caught in his throat as he caught sight of her necklace. His voice deepened to an unsettling growl as he glared at the jeweled metal.

“What is...*that*...doing around your neck?”

Claudia took the chance to thrust him away. As space opened between them, she clasped her hands around the necklace protectively.

“Why would you do this, brother?!”

“Give me that. It is wasted on you.”

“Answer me! Why have you killed our father?! Why are you cutting down our good nobles?!”

“That is not for you to know. Shut your mouth and do as I say.”

“Stay back!” Claudia stammered in terror as Flaus advanced on her—and stopped. Somebody had stepped between them.

“That’s close enough,” Hiro said.

“Lord Hiro. And what, pray tell, do you think you are doing?”

“Standing in the way of a man with a truly hideous look on his face.”

Shielding Claudia behind him, Hiro raised his right hand. Out from empty space emerged Excalibur, its point trained firmly on Flaus.

The prince scrambled backward, alarmed by the Heavenly Sovereign’s sudden appearance. “What is that?!”

“None of your concern.”

Hiro sank into a crouch with Excalibur raised horizontally. He twisted his hips to lay his left hand against the blade. Panic flashed across Flaus’s face at the sight of Hiro’s practiced motions.

“Let’s be reasonable, Lord Hiro,” the crown prince protested. “Lay down your arms and I will see that you are treated well. As an honored guest, even. I need you as leverage against the empire. I have no reason to wish you harm.”

“That’s not a very convincing offer.”

All at once, Hiro was a blur of motion. Before Flaus could react, his right arm was sailing through the air, trailing a ribbon of blood.

“Gyaaaaaah! My... My arm! You cut off my arm!”

“Pathetic.” Hiro smirked. “And sloppy. If you call yourself a prince, grit your teeth and bear it.”

“You’ll pay for this, you cur!” Flaus snarled. “I’ll have your head!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill you. You’re more valuable alive.”

Flaus was clearly the ringleader of this attempted coup. Taking him hostage would secure their safe escape from the castle.

As Hiro strode toward the crown prince, several severed heads flew in from his left. The grisly masses bounced across the floor several times before gravity brought them to a stop. There were four in total, their faces twisted in pain. Both Hiro and Flaus recognized them—they had once belonged to imperial officials.

“Why did you slay the envoys, you fool?!”

Surprisingly, the objection came from Flaus. The killing seemed not to have been on his orders.

“Forgive my indiscretion,” came a voice. “They resisted when I tried to escort them to their confinement, so it seemed prudent to relieve them of their heads.”

“Are you mad?! Do you seek to make war with the empire?!”

“Calm yourself, my lord. I have not killed them all.”

“One will be enough to invite the emperor’s wrath, you imbecile!”

The tall figure of Garius advanced up the stairs, indifferent to Flaus’s frantic objections. Spattered with gore from head to toe, he looked more demon than man. Unless he had gone out of his way to bathe in the envoys’ blood, the heads on the ground could not account for his appearance. He had killed more than just those four.

“Now, Lord Hiro.” Garius halted. “I shall be the one to face you...or so I should like to say, but I fear another has a prior claim.”

Puzzled but wary, Hiro adopted a guarded stance.

“Wrong way, boy. Behind you.”

“Ngh!”

The arrow skittered away, deflected by his blade. A second came winging in its wake, seeking to catch him between the eyes. It took all of his speed to evade it.

Garius saw his chance and pounced. “Gah ha ha! Just as I’d hoped! The scion of Mars makes for fine sport!”

Weaving between the man’s swings, Hiro glanced toward the entryway. As he looked, the doors crashed open and a wave of soldiers flooded in, speartips glinting and swords at the ready. They set upon the nobles with abandon. Drunken and unarmed, their victims died in droves without so much as a chance to fight back.

“There are few finer marksmen in this world than Baal van Bittenia. A crowded hall is no obstacle to him. To elude his arrows is no mean feat!” Garius grinned to see Hiro scanning the unfolding bloodbath, searching for the archer. “Now, for how long will you duck and dodge, I wonder? I tire of this chase!”

Hiro leaned back to avoid Garius’s swing and pivoted onto the offensive. He struck his opponent’s blade once, twice, ducked an arrow, and then resumed his assault.

This is bad. I can’t take on both at once and protect Claudia.

Three more arrows came flying in quick succession, but the fluttering hem of the Black Camellia batted them away. The archer—Baal, Garius had said—seemed to have realized that Garius was outmatched and switched his focus to the princess, aiming to keep Hiro’s hands tied.

I could try hunting this Baal down...

But that would cost Claudia’s life. The arrows were swift and unerring in their arcs. Each one was being fired to kill.

Even as his mind whirled, people were dying. Moans, roars, shrieks—every kind of cry imaginable filled the hall. Guards who had run out of unarmed nobles to slaughter began to turn their attention toward the throne.

“Is that hesitation I feel in your blows?” Garius crowed. “Do you believe you can face me with less than your best?”

“I’d be trying harder if you made me.”

“Hm?”

“Like now. You aren’t watching your feet.”

“Wha—?”

Garius looked down. All too late, he saw that he had been pushed back to the edge of the stairs.

“I’ve figured out where Baal is. And if I know where the arrows are coming from, I can keep myself between them and Claudia.” Hiro kicked Garius’s leg out from under him. “So I’m taking you out of commission for a while. I don’t have the time to duel with a charging boar.”

“Impudent little—”

Garius lost his footing and reeled backward. No warrior of Hiro’s skill would have missed such a wide opening. Without skipping a beat, Hiro planted a kick in the man’s chest.

“Agh!”

Garius crashed down the stairs. Hiro spared him one final glance before hurrying back to Claudia.

“We have to get out of here, Your Highness,” he urged her. “And quickly.”

“But...”

“We don’t have time to hesitate. What do you plan to do if you stay? Fight all these men by yourself? If you want to avenge your father, right now you have to run.”

For a brief moment, a look of reluctance crossed her face, and then resolution kindled in her eyes. She stood. “This way!”

She led him by the hand to the wall behind the throne. A great tapestry hung there, emblazoned with the heraldry of Lebering. She thrust it aside to reveal an iron door. For a moment, it seemed like they had found their escape, but the door’s sturdy frame had no handles or openings. For all intents and purposes, it was a slab of metal embedded in the wall.

“Does it even open?” Hiro asked with some apprehension. They didn’t have time to pry open a rusty old door. He was starting to plan a forcible escape through the entrance when Claudia lifted a hand to her neck and held up her necklace.

“Father told me that this would serve as the key.”

She raised it to show him the amethyst set into the metal. In spite of the pressing danger, he couldn’t help but close his eyes in reminiscence. The presence emanating from the manastone was all too familiar.

I knew I’d seen that somewhere before. It was yours, wasn’t it, Lox?

It felt like an unexpected reunion with an old friend; a comrade whom he had long given up on ever seeing again. The corners of his eyes grew hot.

The gem was no artifact of a zlostia ancestor, but the manastone of Lox van Lebering himself. It was traditionally held by the rulers of the kingdom, passed down from one to the next, and so was known as the Dellingr, or Kingsjewel. Its unusual luster and variety of hue made it particularly highly prized, even among the more precious manastones known as golden amethysts.

Claudia set the stone into an indentation in the door. With a heavy grating sound, the portal opened.

“Where does this—?”

Hiro tried to ask where the passage led, but he had no time. A volley of arrows sped toward them, threading their way through the encroaching guards. He thrust Claudia through the door and spun around, lashing out with Excalibur. As the arrows scattered, he rounded on the soldiers.

“Don’t get ahead of yourselves.”

The first man he beheaded. The second’s throat he slit. Excalibur slipped effortlessly between the seams of the guards’ armor, piercing flesh and sending blood arcing through the air. Before the first sprays of gore could splatter the flagstones, he unleashed a flurry of silver, raising a heap of corpses.

“Have you learned your lesson or do you want more?”

As red mist swirled around him, he settled again into a battle stance and grinned in challenge. His swordsmanship halted the guards in their tracks. One man whimpered.

“No one makes a fool out of me, boy!” A roar of rage issued from their ranks. Garius burst forth and fell upon Hiro.

“Then make me pay, if you can. It’s only fair. I plan on doing the same to you.” Garius’s blade clashed with Excalibur. Sparks showered.

“I’ll take your head next time we meet. Try not to lose it until then.” Hiro planted a punch squarely in the man’s face, forcing a grunt from his lungs, and turned away. “See you around.”

With that, he vanished into the darkness of the passageway. A fresh volley of arrows bounced uselessly off the doors as they shut behind him. The guards surged forward.

“There’s no bloody handle!” one cried.

“Wedge your sword into the crack, then! Pry it open!”

“It’s no use! There’s no crack to be seen!”

“So how do we open the blasted thing?!”

“What are you idiots doing?! After them!” Flaus’s anger cut through the

confusion. He was breathing raggedly—perhaps caught up in the excitement of the moment, although the loss of his arm could not have helped.

The guards stepped aside, allowing the prince to approach the door. He laid a tentative hand on the metal.

“It seems that only one who bears the Delligr may pass.” Garius’s voice issued from behind him, dripping fury.

“I never knew this door was ever here,” Flaus said.

“A secret only for the ruler of Lebering to know, perhaps.”

“Curse her!” The prince kicked the door in his fury. “With her fled and the Delligr gone, what will become of my plans?! All that time I spent preparing for this day, wasted!”

Garius stopped behind him. “Your plans are not ruined yet,” he said, his voice low and reassuring.

“And how can you say that?!”

“Calm yourself, my lord, lest you bleed out.”

“Why must you be so—?” Flaus spun around in rage, only to find that the man behind him was not Garius. A hooded zlosta stood there: Baal van Bittenia, holding the fiendbow Failnaught.

“Our goal remains what it ever was, my lord. If one path is closed to us, we need simply make another.”

“Lord van Bittenia...” Flaus’s wrath evaporated at the sight of the enigmatic Asura.

Baal wore his hood low at all times to shield his face from view. What lay beneath, no one knew. The commonfolk’s opinion was divided on whether he was horrifically ugly or as beautiful as the gods above. More than a few people objected to such a shadowy figure occupying the seat of Asura, but he had retained his position over the years nonetheless—his uncommon tactical acumen had proved itself too valuable to the prosperity of Lebering.

“We must prepare a story for the people,” he said. “Waiting too long to assuage their fears will only arouse suspicion.”

Flaus trusted Baal's intellect as much as anybody else. "So what do we tell them?"

"All in due time. First, you must have your arm seen to."

Baal instructed the royal guards to summon a physician before turning to Garius and asking him to find where the secret passage emerged. As the exchange unfolded, Flaus eased himself onto the throne. He beckoned a soldier over and ordered the man to bring him fruit and wine before returning his attention to Baal.

"So, again," he ventured, "what do you propose we tell the people?"

"I would suggest that the Grantzian envoys were conspiring with a faction of nobles to kill the king. That will focus their attention outward for a little while."

"And what do we do about Claudia?"

"If we can apprehend her before she crosses the border, all the better, but if she does flee Lebering, it will almost certainly be to the empire. There are no other paths left to her."

"We cannot allow her to reach the empire with the Dellinger. If she does..."

"Indeed. The imperials will no doubt rejoice to have *casus belli*."

"My own people will call me a usurper! My nobles will turn traitor!"

"They will not, my lord. I will not allow it."

"Then what's your plan?"

Baal gave a nod of affirmation, his smile widening wickedly beneath his cowl. "First, I will attack the south of the kingdom so that it does not stand in our way. Then I will continue into the empire. I will gather soldiers on the border and demand the return of our princess, showing the world that ours is the righteous claim."

"But...that's ridiculous!" Flaus spluttered. "You would wage war with the empire?!"

"Does the prospect scare you?" The mockery in Baal's voice was faint, but there was no mistaking it.

Flaus took a swig of wine. “Of course it does. We have no quarrel with them. There are one hundred thousand soldiers in the Fifth Legion alone, and another hundred thousand in the north’s standing army. We can muster perhaps forty thousand. We have no chance of victory.”

“Not if we were to fight them all at once, but their numbers mean nothing if they are scattered. The empire’s attention is on Friedhof in the west—I trust you know the Spirit Wall. It will take time for the Fifth Legion to marshal its forces.”

“Are you saying you believe that we can win?” A hopeful expectation crept into Flaus’s gaze.

Baal answered matter-of-factly. “If we command our army effectively. But first, we must rid the south of Haniel, or we will have gathered our forces in the north only to trap them.”

Flaus’s lips twisted at the lack of reassurance he had hoped for, but eventually he nodded. “Very well. We have come too far to turn back now. Do as you see fit.”

“Of course, my lord. To begin, let us execute the imperial envoys and their guards.” Baal’s laugh was a dry rattle as his lips pulled into a sadistic grin.

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“I can only apologize for my foolishness. I never believed my brother capable of such savagery.”

Claudia bowed her head in apology. The torchlight picked out faint tear trails where it caught her cheek.

Hiro looked around. Torches lined the walls at regular intervals, seeming to continue all the way down the tunnel. He closed his eyes, breathed deep, then turned back to Claudia.

“We have to keep moving. Let’s get out of here.”

He lifted a flaming torch from the wall and set out, using it to light the rest as he went. Claudia fell in silently behind him.

“Do you know where this leads?” he asked.

“I do. It comes out near a village called Carilles. Father told me so more than once, so there’s no mistake.”

“And Flaus doesn’t know?”

“Only the bearer of the Dellinger may enter this place. Father would not have told him about it.”

“I see.”

Perhaps King Svarov had foreseen Flaus’s betrayal, perhaps not. The truth had died with him. The question now was how they could put a stop to the crown prince’s madness.

They walked in silence for a while. At last, the exit came into view. The wavering torchlight illuminated a stone door, conspicuously devoid of moss. Someone had kept it clean.

Hiro gestured for Claudia to step back and shunted the stone with his shoulder. A cloud of dust rose up as it swung open. Fragments of rock trickled down from above. He stepped through to find himself in a shed piled high with rusty farming equipment. Slipping soundlessly to the outer door, he listened for anybody outside. At last, he turned back to Claudia, satisfied that they were alone.

“Eh?”

A noise of surprise escaped his mouth. The princess had stripped off her dress and was standing in her undergarments.

“Erm...” Her cheeks flushed pink to see him staring. “Would you terribly mind looking away until I’m decent?”

With a deep sigh, Hiro faced back outside. “Can I ask why you’re taking off your clothes?”

“My dress would attract attention. I thought I might change into something less conspicuous.”

“I suppose that’s sensible. I hadn’t thought of that.”

If he led her outside in her ballgown, Flaus’s forces would find them in minutes. He looked down at himself, then reached for a nearby sack.

“I suppose I’d better cover up too.”

His black overcoat would stand out particularly starkly against Lebering’s white snowfields. He tore a hole down the side of the sack, opened it up, and wrapped it around his shoulders, covering up the Black Camellia.

“I am ready, Lord Hiro,” came Claudia’s voice. “We ought to hurry.”

Hiro turned to see the princess wearing peasant’s attire. A kerchief covered the purple of her hair, and holes pockmarked her clothes.

“Should you not remove your eyepatch?”

“I can’t,” he said. “The wound still hasn’t healed. I don’t want the cold getting to it.”

“I see. Then we must endeavor to avoid being seen.”

With that, they left the toolshed together.

The frozen sky was empty of stars. Heavy clouds streamed overhead, obscuring the light of the moon. In the darkness below, a gale howled like a starving beast.

“This way! Hurry!”

Claudia’s voice cut as sharp as the wind through the blinding snowstorm, urging Hiro on. He tried to hurry after her, but the snow caught his foot and he fell to one knee.

She hurried back to his side, her hand outstretched in an offer of aid. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine. Just keep going. If we stop now, we’ll freeze to death.”

“At least they can’t follow us,” she said. “Although at this rate, the blizzard might do their job for them.”

He took her fingers in his and found them ice-cold. They did not have long. Warmth might be too much to hope for, but finding shelter was imperative. Once the blizzard passed, they would be on the run again, and that would take every last ounce of strength they could conserve.

“There.” He pointed to a cattle shed. It would keep the wind off well enough and help them retain some warmth. “No one will be working the fields this late, so...” He caught himself. “Of course, if you’d rather somewhere else...”

“Never fear. Nobody would ever believe that a princess spent the night in a stall.” Claudia stepped forward and turned around, pressing a finger to a mischievous smile. “But you must promise not to tell. The people would faint if they knew.”

Hiro raised his arms with a theatrical sigh. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Although he didn’t voice it, there was another reason he had suggested the cattle shed. Drix, Huginn, and Muninn, whom he had sent to lie low in Tiane’s castle town, had almost certainly escaped to this village. He had given them simple instructions: if anything went awry at the palace, they were to flee the city for a nearby settlement and find somewhere to hide.

And the cold will be harsh for Huginn and Muninn.

Outsiders would stand out easily in a settlement this small. Not many places could keep the Lichtein-born siblings warm while fending off prying eyes. In this blizzard, at this time of day, factoring in that the locals wouldn’t be likely to venture outside, there was only one place they could be.

Hiro stopped and looked up. A barn with a red-gabled roof rose above him. Shielding Claudia behind him, he pushed open the door. He could sense three people lurking within, holding their breath. They were well hidden, but not well enough.

“It’s me,” he announced. “You can come out.”

They emerged from the darkness to kneel before him.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Your Lordship.”

“Aye, you can say that again! If you were missing so much as a hair on your head, the boss would’ve had my guts for garters!”

After Huginn and Muninn had finished their excited greetings, Drix straightened from his bow. “I am pleased that you are safe, Your Highness, but we do not have the luxury of time. We ought to discuss what we know.”

“Please. I’ve got a lot of questions myself. I don’t know what’s been happening outside of the throne room.”

“First of all, allow me to say that we escaped the royal city without incident...”

Drix launched into an explanation. While Hiro had been embroiled in Flaus’s ploy for the throne, strange events had been afoot in the castle town. A great volume of soldiers had descended on the streets, heading for inns and noble residences. They hadn’t stayed to lock the city down once their work was done; instead, they had left as quickly as they had arrived. A steady flow of nobles had ridden from the palace in the time since, Flaus and his co-conspirators among them.

“I see,” Hiro said. “Then I suppose it’s my turn.”

He thanked Drix for his work, then beckoned Claudia over and introduced her to his subordinates.

“I can only apologize for all the trouble you have suffered. I never could have imagined that my brother would go to such lengths...”

“It is quite enough for us that you are safe, Your Highness,” Drix reassured her before turning back to Hiro. “Might I ask if you have noticed anything unusual around the village?”

“Come to think of it...” Hiro set a finger to his chin. “You’d think they’d be looking for us, but I haven’t seen a single soldier.”

“Quite so. The military presence in and around the royal city is virtually nonexistent. One might surmise that almost every last man has joined Prince Flaus’s army in its march south. By now, I daresay his forces must number over thirty thousand.”

“He’s marching south? Not toward the empire?”

Drix shrugged. “I cannot speak to specifics, but so it seems.”

Hiro sank into thought, but Claudia drew closer, interrupting his musings.

“I expect that my brother means to attack the south of Lebering,” she said.

At that, every gaze converged on her.

“Haniel rules the south, and he is loyal to my father. As soon as he hears what happened tonight, he will place himself in my brother’s way. His nobles and his people love him. I should not be surprised to learn that my brother considers him a great threat.”

“Do you know how many men the south can muster?” Hiro asked.

Claudia answered without hesitation. “Ten thousand, but many will be commonfolk, and some elderly too.”

“Lord Hiro,” Drix interjected, “I propose that we write to Prince Selene for aid. Through some happy accident, he is conducting exercises near the border. If we combine his forces with those of the south, crushing Prince Flaus will be a simple matter.”

The plan was sound on paper, but something about it bothered Hiro.

So that’s what’s going on...

Second Prince Selene’s ominous parting words repeated in his mind. All at once, the small discrepancies that had been nagging at him connected into an unbroken chain, and the full picture came into focus.

“The emperor knew this would happen.”

“His Majesty expected a coup?”

He had to. Too much didn’t make sense otherwise. The second prince’s presence near the border was suspicious enough, but nobody would send a strategist with Hiro’s military record on a peaceful diplomatic mission. If the emperor truly wanted to get rid of him, it would have been easier to pack him off to serve the empire on some irrelevant battlefield. Instead, it seemed the man had higher priorities—namely, quenching the sparks of Lebering’s revolt before they could drift across the border. Most likely, he hoped to use Hiro’s capture or the envoys’ deaths to justify an invasion, crushing Lebering quickly and decisively with the north’s military might.

Well, I’m not going to let him have his way. My friend built this nation. I won’t let anyone destroy it, not even an emperor.

Calling on all of the ingenuity he had cultivated a thousand years prior, he

racked his brain for a way to ensure Lebering's survival. Claudia's figure caught his eye, and a plan began to form.

"Drix, I need you to deliver a message to the second prince. Tell him we don't need any reinforcements. That the deaths of the envoys were not the work of the true rulers of Lebering, but the actions of blood-crazed rebels."

"At once, Your Highness. But, if I may, what will you do next?"

"I will escort Princess Claudia south to find Haniel. And then I will crush the rebel army."

As Hiro touched his fingers to his eyepatch, his lips curled into the faintest hint of a smile.

*

The sixteenth day of the tenth month, Imperial Year 1023

A maelstrom of carnage swept over the southern Lebering province of Halm. Flaus and his rebel army showed no mercy. They pillaged, slaughtered, burned villages, razed towns. Men were tortured until they could not move. Women were snatched as they fled to sate the soldiers' lust. Even children were not spared. They were beheaded in front of their parents and left to rot in the dirt.

Beneath the spreading cloud of putrefaction, yet another town burned. Its buildings lay in smoldering cinders. Black smoke rose from the fields, mingling with the stench of death as it drifted skyward. Out in the streets, where small fires still guttered, blackened corpses littered the ground.

"Damn shame we don't take slaves like the desert wolves or we could've kept the women."

"Plenty of women south of here. If you ask me, you ought to be more worried about whether yer rod'll rust!"

Two soldiers conversed amid a chorus of crude guffaws. They swaggered through the town as though the streets were their own, their arms piled high with fresh spoils. Women's screams rang in the air.

"Can't say I ever thought I'd have the chance to loot the south."

"You can say that again. They're our own countrymen, even if their blood

does run human. And they've got one of the Asuras protecting 'em. Haniel himself."

"Just goes to show that Baal's a crafty sot. Even Haniel couldn't outsmart him. We should thank our lucky stars we sided with Flaus."

"Aye, true's true."

As the pair chuckled, a rider appeared, thundering toward them from down the street. On his arm was the blue band of a messenger. His horse whinnied as he skidded to a stop.

"Return to camp immediately!" he shouted. "By order of Crown Prince Flaus!"

The soldiers glanced at each other, then shrugged.

"Pull the other one. We've still got plenty recon left to do."

"Aye, what 'e said. We're not due back yet."

Their confusion was understandable. Their "reconnaissance" was scheduled to last for two more days.

"You have until tomorrow to return to camp! Whether you believe me's no business of mine, but it's your heads that'll roll!"

The messenger turned his horse about and returned the way he came. Soon, he was nothing more than a distant shadow and a faint drumming of hooves.

One soldier turned to the other. "Where'd that come from?"

"Bah." The other spat. "I was hoping for a little more fun."

"Prince's orders. Can't do shit. Now, let's go find a woman that's still breathing."

They dropped their plunder where they stood and set out in the direction of the screams.

A day's march from the burned-out village lay the rebel army's camp. An extravagant tent rose in the center with the flag of Lebering fluttering beside it. Behind a barrier of guards, Baal and his strategists were holding a meeting.

"Seven villages, two towns," one of the strategists recited. "We have left the

men's heads on spikes on the castle walls and slain the women and children. The surrounding settlements have fled their homes in fear and headed south."

As the man finished his report, the rest of the advisors began to look appalled at the army's activities.

One of the officers could not restrain himself. "We have gone too far!" he exclaimed. "The south will be barren for generations! This will haunt us, mark my words!"

Baal waved the accusation away in annoyance. "I have recalled the reconnaissance units. They will conduct themselves more properly in future."

The gesture only seemed to incense the officer. "What do you mean to achieve by massacring our own countrymen?!"

"Perhaps I allowed the men to get a little carried away, but this was a necessary step in my plan."

"What *plan*?!"

Baal sighed in exasperation. "What do you suppose will happen when the refugees flee south?"

The east of the Grantzian Empire lay only sixty sel due south from where they stood. The rebel army's advance would drive the fleeing commonfolk across the border—not into the empire's northern territories, where Baal later hoped to invade, but into the east.

"I suppose the eastern nobles will welcome them with open arms," the officer replied.

"My point exactly." Baal stood up from his chair. The shadow over his face deepened as he pulled his hood lower. "Had they fled from some other nation, the empire might leave them to rot, but Lebering is a longtime ally. The nobles will have no choice but to take them in."

With a clack, the Asura set a pawn on the map.

"People require sustenance to live. The refugees will need clothes, food, and shelter. Yet such a sudden increase in population will oblige the eastern territories to empty their coffers and open their storehouses. When strife

inevitably arises, the imperial citizens will turn against their new neighbors.”

They would have to watch the resources they had stockpiled with the sweat of their own brow being ravaged by newcomers from a foreign land—a nonhostile invasion. Discontent would turn to anger, and anger would turn to resentment against the ruling class. Once it exploded, it would be unstoppable. Revolt would ignite and, whether it succeeded or failed, the nation would crumble all the same.

“The empire is vast, and so is its population. That will be its downfall.”

Dissent would spread from one province to the next like wildfire. All of the malcontent that the empire had accumulated over its long history would erupt at once. In the ensuing chaos, it would be a simple matter to carve off a piece of the north.

“That is why we pillage. That is why we slaughter. As a warning. The more the northern territories fear us, the easier they will be to control once we have them in our grasp.”

Baal concluded his explanation, but some of his advisors and officers still looked unconvinced.

“Some will see our intentions, will they not?” one ventured. “Surely some of the eastern nobles will oppose taking in the refugees.”

“All the better if they do. In squabbling amongst themselves about who must take responsibility, they will only cause more discord. We will make of these refugees a *wedge*”—Baal drove a dagger into the table to emphasize his point —“to bring about the empire’s downfall. It has believed itself ruler of the world for far too long.”

The conviction in his words finally brought silence to the table. No more objections were forthcoming.

“This meeting is adjourned. We will reconvene once the reconnaissance units return. In the meantime, you may return to your posts.” He cast one final look around the table and left.

His next destination was not far: Prince Flaus’s tent. The guards recognized him on sight and stepped back to clear the way.

As soon as he stepped through the tent flap, a vile stench assaulted his nose. The reek of decay suffusing the tent would have made any ordinary man vomit. It issued from a sickbed in the center of the room. Lying upon its pristine white sheets, with skin pale as death, was the sorry figure of Prince Flaus.

“Ah...Lord van Bittenia. What news?”

The prince tried to sit up as he registered Baal’s arrival, but his strength quickly gave out. He collapsed back onto the bed, panting with exertion.

Baal approached soundlessly to stand over him. “All is well, my lord.”

“Good... Good.”

Flaus’s face retained no trace of its youthful vivacity. His face was as wrinkled as an old man’s and his body was emaciated. Only a week had passed since the king’s killing, but he looked as though he had aged decades.

His decline had begun three days prior, when he had vomited blood and collapsed during a strategy meeting. Ever since then, he had grown thinner by the hour, until at last his extremities had begun to rot away. Now, he had lost his right eye entirely and the sight was fading in his left. Standing unaided was beyond him.

“Heh...”

And so Baal knew that Flaus could not see him laugh. His repulsive purple lips curled into a smile as his throat rattled with amusement.

Flaus’s cracked lips parted. “And what of Claudia? Have you found her?”

“There has been no word as of yet, my lord.”

“She’s a cruel woman...to leave her brother alone in such a state...” A tear trickled from the prince’s eye. He raised a three-fingered hand; the other two had rotted off. “Bring her to me, Lord van Bittenia. I need her.”

“Try not to move, Your Highness. It would not do to lose another finger.” Baal had to clamp a hand to his mouth to suppress the urge to giggle. “Rest assured, I will take care of Princess Claudia. Now, please, you must take your medicine.”

He grasped Flaus’s head and wrenched it upright. Something like a scream issued forth, but it was far too weak to escape the tent, and none came to help.

Baal watched with amusement for a while as the prince's face contorted in agony. Eventually, he reached into his pocket and produced a golden bottle, which he brought to Flaus's lips.

"Drink up, my lord. Soon, bitterness will turn to sweetness, pain to pleasure, and doubt to hope."

"Mmph! Mmrgh! Agh!" Flaus thrashed as an unidentifiable liquid flowed down his gullet.

"Surrender to our lord and you will be blessed."

Darkness pressed in, black and cold. Within the stagnant air of the tent's confines, Flaus's torment continued long into the night.

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Hiro and his companions made their way south through idyllic scenery. Grasses and flowers peeked through the snow, swaying joyfully in the breeze. Trills of birdsong drifted from above, dispelling unease with their tranquil melodies.

Once they passed into the south of Lebering, however, the view turned gruesome. It was hard not to gasp at the sight. They stared as one at the ominous shapes ahead: wooden crosses rising along the roadside like gravestones. Nailed to the boards were women, children, the elderly—the people of the south. The bodies lined the road as far as the eye could see, a ghastly brushstroke on the landscape. Dead tongues could give no testimony, but it was not hard to guess how they had perished.

Hiro and his companions could only stare in mute horror. Their feet seemed rooted to the earth as their minds gradually made sense of the scene.

"What kind of brutes would do this to their own people?!" Huginn made no attempt to hide her disgust.

"Killin' women and children. Motherless bastards, the lot of 'em." Muninn shielded his eyes from the horror.

For her part, Claudia fell to her knees and offered a prayer. Hiro only burned the cruelty of the sight into his memory.

“Muninn.”

“What is it, chief?”

“Let’s go. If the refugees were right, the southern army’s camp should be close.”

“Aye. Let’s.”

They resumed their progress. As heart-wrenching as it was to leave the bodies where they were, there was no other choice. Even if four people *could* have dug that many graves, they had no time to delay.

“Many people in Lebering still uphold the ideals of zlostá supremacy,” Claudia explained. “And many of Haniel’s subjects are human. The rebels likely do not consider them true countrymen. That is what allows them to commit such atrocities.” She paused. “My brother was one of those people. Father always did scold him for his beliefs.”

“Those who are not zlostá are no better than beasts” was the creed of zlostá supremacy. Hiro could not have forgotten it if he tried. It was the ideology of arrogant monsters. In its name, many lives had been lost, much blood had been spilled, and much hatred had clouded the skies. Even now, a thousand years later, it persisted like a lingering curse.

“But does that really explain this kind of brutality?” Hiro asked. “Or is there more to it?”

Claudia fell silent for a moment. “There...was something else,” she said finally. “On the day he died, Father was supposed to announce that he would yield the throne to me.”

“And Flaus found out?”

“Somehow, yes, I believe so. And it seems that even murdering his own father did not placate his anger. Now, he seeks vengeance on all the people of the south.” Claudia’s eyebrows knotted despondently. She lowered her gaze and exhaled a white breath. “I am dreadfully sorry to have involved you all in my family’s quarrels.”

“You don’t have to apologize. We’re here because we want to help.”

She turned to Hiro with a quizzical expression. “If I may, why are you being so kind to me?”

Hiro smiled, but he said nothing. His reasons were better left unspoken. It was true that he was unwilling to watch his old friend’s nation fall to ruin, but he also had a more practical motivation: a healthy Lebering would be indispensable to his future plans.

“I see the camp, Your Lordship!”

Huginn bounded cheerfully back across the snow, pointing down the road. In the distance were lines of white tents. Smoke, perhaps from cooking fires, rose from the encampment in wind-blown spirals.

“Well, then,” Hiro said. “Let’s go and see Haniel.”

They prepared to explain themselves to the sentries at the gate, but there was no need. The men stiffened at the sight of Claudia.

“Your Highness!” one stammered. “You’re safe!”

“Well met, brave soldiers,” she greeted them. “Might you tell me where I can find Haniel?”

“Your Highness, there’s something you ought to...” The soldier seemed to struggle for words. “Perhaps you should come with me.”

He turned to his comrades and asked someone to take his post, then set out.

As Hiro followed, he noticed for the first time the air of hopelessness hanging over the encampment. Grim-faced soldiers hurried about, loading supplies onto carts, their footsteps filling the air with dust. It almost seemed as though they were preparing to retreat.

Soon enough, their guide stopped before a tent. Hiro’s eyes narrowed.

This isn’t a command tent. It’s a medical one.

The shadow of unease that had hung over his chest since his arrival began to squeeze around his heart.

The group stepped through the tent flap. A simple bed lay inside, its once-clean white sheets unsettlingly bulbous and mottled with blood. The sharp

scent of medicines pricked at the nostrils.

“Your Highness?”

A middle-aged man sat by the bed, his face downcast. He stood as he registered the newcomers’ arrival and staggered toward them on uncertain feet, falling to his knees at last before Claudia.

“You’re safe!” he wailed. “Oh, thank the heavens!”

“Raise your head,” she replied. “Tell me, what is happening? Where is Haniel?”

She laid a hand on his shoulder, encouraging him to stand, but he only pressed his forehead more firmly against the ground.

“Forgive our foolishness, Your Highness! He is dead in battle!”

“Dead?”

“The enemy outwitted us, Your Highness! Prince Flaus sent word that you had been captured and invited us to negotiate, but it was all an ambush! Lord Haniel fought valiantly, but he perished on the field!”

“Is that his body?” Claudia cast a hesitant glance at the lumpen shape on the bed. The man gave a brief nod, before descending once more into sobs.

Hiro looked between them and sighed. *That explains why they were preparing to retreat.*

It was hard to imagine that Haniel had gone to negotiate alone. More likely, he had taken most of his advisors with him. Now, his army was headless, with nobody left to take command.

“Excuse me,” Hiro interrupted, “but how many men do you have left?”

“Five thousand, my lord, a thousand of them wounded.” The man’s eyebrows furrowed in surprise at the question, but he answered truthfully enough. “The enemy fell upon us in full force while we were reeling from the loss of Lord Haniel.”

With their leader dead and their chain of command in disarray, they had been unable to muster any effective resistance. They had lost more than five

thousand men and been forced into a humiliating retreat.

“Your Highness, before Lord Haniel passed, he instructed me to give you this.” The man retreated to a corner of the tent and returned with a cloth-wrapped bundle. “The fiendblade Hauteclaire. Please, it is yours to take.”

The cloth unwound to reveal the fiendblade’s steel. Claudia’s hands flew to her mouth. Tears beaded in the corners of her eyes.

“Will you lead us in Lord Haniel’s stead?” the man pleaded.

A hush fell over the tent. The air turned stifling. At last, Claudia took the fiendblade in her hands and approached Haniel’s body.

“I do not know whether I am equal to this burden...but all who bear royal blood have a duty to safeguard Lebering. I swear, I will do my utmost to restore the peace.”

She drove her blade into the earth and rested her forehead against the hilt. Hiro caught a glimpse of her face as she bowed her head. He closed his eyes, fighting back the anger that flared in his chest.

“Lord Hiro, would you lend me your strength in this?”

At the sound of her voice, he opened his eyes again. “I’ll do what I can. Just let me ask you—what exactly is it that you want?”

“To strike down my usurper brother. I cannot allow him to bring any more strife to these lands.”

“In that case, my strength is yours.”

Despite his confidence, their position was extraordinarily poor. Engaging on conventional terms would be a path to defeat. The enemy was crafty—they knew to entice their foes with tempting bait and strike once they were committed. He sensed a shrewd and ruthless intelligence at work behind their lines.

And our side is almost out of options.

The crucifixions they had passed on the way were not a provocation. They were meant to break the spirits of the retreating soldiers. Such a show of overt brutality would inevitably seed terror in their hearts, even as they outwardly

grew enraged. With morale at rock bottom, the troops mentally exhausted, and the odds stacked against them, he had to find a way to turn the tables.

“We’ll start by reforming the units. Have the officers assemble in the command tent.”

“Of course.” Claudia nodded before turning to the man on his knees. “Might you find all those who yet live?”

The man nodded and left the tent at a run.

Claudia turned back to Hiro. “Am I to take it that you have a plan?”

“It’s nothing complicated.” He flashed her a self-assured smile. “But first, I want to hear what the officers have to say.”

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Before long, the surviving officers were all assembled in the command tent. Their faces betrayed confusion at having been summoned so abruptly. Were they not supposed to be fleeing the coming massacre? Nervous whispers filled their ranks.

Hiro arrived to that anxious audience with Claudia by his side. The officers stood as one and bowed as they entered. Claudia bowed in return before taking her seat at the head of the table.

“My apologies for calling you here on such short notice. Allow me to introduce my aide and military advisor, Hiro Schwartz von Grantz, the fourth prince of the Grantzian Empire.”

The officers’ eyes grew wide as saucers. Apprehension filled the room as comprehension spread among them. Hiro’s expression did not flicker. Their naked incredulity bounced off him as he laid a map and some documents on the table, bowed his head politely, and took his place at Claudia’s side.

“At ease,” he said, gesturing to the chairs laid out around the table for the officers. They obediently took their seats.

So far, so good. He could hardly expect them to trust him yet, but at least they weren’t scoffing at him. Despite some reservations, they seemed willing to hear him out.

“First things first. The retreat is canceled. If we permit the rebel army to run roughshod over the south any longer, it may never recover. We must strike down Prince Flaus before the damage becomes irreversible.”

Claudia’s presence forestalled any vocal dissent, but Hiro could see the dissatisfaction in the officers’ faces. Seeing that doubts needed to be assuaged, he drew a short breath and spoke again.

“The odds are against us, it’s true, but the situation can still be salvaged. Your people beg you to save them from the fires of war. Your fallen commander and comrades implore you to avenge their deaths. For their sakes, you must stand again and fight.”

Some faint light returned to their eyes to hear him speak with such confidence. It was said, after all, that Mars had never known defeat, and his scion’s words carried weight. He could not deny some disappointment—the presence of someone with a little more fight in them would have greased the wheels immeasurably—but he could not blame them for being dejected after the defeat they had suffered. First, he needed to restore their spirits.

“I put to you the question of what to do next. Anybody who wishes to propose a plan has my permission to speak.”

“Have you no plan of your own, Lord Hiro?” Claudia asked apprehensively.

Hiro nodded. “Of course I do. Several, in fact. But first, I want to hear what the rest of you think.”

The officers looked at him in surprise at that. It was hard to blame them. They were the broken survivors of a defeated army. No sane man would come to them for optimism.

“Why?” one man finally said.

Hiro heaved a sigh of genuine disappointment. So they had come here expecting someone else to tell them what to do. “I don’t need yes-men who can’t form their own opinions.”

A future hero of Lebering might be seated at that very table. He needed to find that talent and cultivate it, for the sake of the future as well as the present. One more capable commander in the world would mean countless more lives

saved.

“Forget about princes. Forget about Mars. Forget who I am and tell me your honest ideas. If they’re good, I’ll use them.”

Hesitation could be fatal. Seeking to please one’s superior made a commander indecisive, and indecision cost lives, sometimes battles. Indeed, the loss of a single unit could doom an entire nation. Cringing subservience had no place on the battlefield. It had to be weeded out swiftly and decisively.

“Will you hear mine, then?” A burly looking officer at last broke the silence.

Hiro gave the man a small smile. Regardless of the quality of his idea, the fact that he had spoken was enough. “You may speak.”

“Thank you, sir.” The burly man stood. Sweat poured off his brow. “They have numbers on their side. As I see it, we ought to make use of the terrain and launch a surprise attack.”

“Would that we could,” a thin-faced officer interjected. “They’ve been holding position for days. Now they’ve had time to send out scouts, they’ll know the lay of the land as well as we do. We might manage to outflank them, but I wouldn’t put coin on doing it without being spotted.”

“But the element of surprise is the only way to overcome their numbers. Are you proposing that we fight them head-on? We’d be slaughtered.”

“I’m proposing that we lure them out. Get them to let their guard down.”

“And how will we manage that?” the burly officer pressed.

The thin-faced man fell silent. He didn’t seem to know.

In obvious frustration, one of the other officers began placing pawns on the map. “How about this? We split our forces in two. One lures them out, the other circles around behind, and we trap them in a pincer.”

“Hold on,” another said. “We can’t pincer a larger force. The two groups will only be isolated and picked off.”

It did not take long for the rest to pitch in. As the air in the tent began to warm, the debate took on a burning intensity. Even so, their arguments seemed to go around in circles. No proposition was convincing enough to be decisive.

Eventually, Hiro stepped in. “Thank you all for your contributions. I think we would all benefit from a drink of water and a moment to rest.”

The officers could not ignore his instruction. They returned to their seats, breathing heavily. Once they had all sat down, Hiro rose. They scrambled to follow suit.

“No, don’t get up.”

The officers looked perplexed, but they did as he asked.

Hiro looked over the room. “As the descendant of Lox van Lebering’s onetime ally, it brings me great joy to see the love that you bear for your country and the ideas you put forward to defend it.”

In that moment, he spoke as the fourth prince of the empire. With a grandiose gesture, he continued.

“Your proposals were all excellent. I would be loath to throw even a single one away. Consequently, I have decided on a course of action.”

The tent went quiet. Somebody swallowed hard. A plan was about to be chosen. If it led the army to victory, its proponent’s name would go down in the annals of Lebering history. Their gazes converged on Hiro as they all but forgot how to breathe.

“I will use them all.”

The officers looked incredulous. Every face screamed bewilderment.

Hiro only smiled. He had anticipated that reaction. “They all have their virtues—and, more importantly, they were all born of your love for your nation.”

Nobody would be disappointed that their idea had been overlooked this way. Hiro’s true goal, however, had been to create a sense of solidarity. They would face the foe not alone, but together.

“I will smooth out the edges myself. We will take them by surprise, we will fight them head-on, and we will have them dancing to our tune as we seize victory.”

If the rebel army had not turned on the people, a peaceable solution might have been possible through Claudia. They had resorted, however, to the lowest

and most barbaric of tactics. That could not be ignored and it could not be forgiven.

“I’ll tighten the noose slowly. Slowly enough that they can feel it. I want them to know exactly who they’ve crossed.”

Hiro planted his hands on the table, exhaling simmering anger with every breath. He looked around the tent. A fire blazed in his eye.

“And I will show them despair.”

His audience shivered at the cold fury in his voice.

*

A small hill stood a short distance from the southern army’s camp. Dense with foliage and shrouded in darkness, it was hidden from the light of the stars. Four men crouched in the underbrush, half-buried in snow. They held their breath as they surveyed the encampment. Their clothes were uniform white, the better to blend into their surroundings, with leaves and twigs stuck on as camouflage. The mud smeared on their faces completed the effect.

“I say we’ve seen enough,” one said. “We ought to make ourselves scarce before we’re spotted.”

“We’ve already sent someone back to report. The rest of us’ve still got a job to do.”

The large man lying nearby stifled a yawn as he spoke. “What’s the point? They’re only five thousand. We could spend all day napping and it wouldn’t make a jot of difference.”

“Aye, a paltry five thousand against our thirty. Those ain’t the kind of odds you beat.” The fourth man was an old soldier sipping on plundered alcohol. He took a glance at the southern camp and snorted before offering the keg to his two more diligent comrades. “No need to work so hard. I’ve drink enough for all of us, though I can’t offer ye meat to go with it.”

“There’s meat aplenty back in town,” the large man sniggered, “if you don’t mind your pork long.”

The two watchmen didn’t respond. Neither showed any sign of moving until

his shift was over.

The old soldier cleared his throat and expelled an exasperated sigh. “You younglings work too hard for your own good. Aye, well, whatever keeps watch duty off these old shoulders...”

“Quiet down a little, old man.” The large man poured liquor into a wooden cup. “We’ll have to run for it if you get us spotted.”

A haughty sniff. “You say that like you’ve lifted a finger all day.”

“Ga ha ha ha! True enough, but I’m still young. I can fight if it comes to it.”

“Let’s hope that youthful confidence don’t get you killed, eh? Now, what’s taking that blasted captain so long? Figured he’d be done pissing by now.”

“Fallen asleep somewhere’s my guess. He drank as much as most men could take.”

“Probably frozen stiff by now in this cold. And it’d serve him right. Idiot thinks he can hold his liquor.”

“Can’t blame a man for wetting his whistle on an assignment this dull.” The large man suddenly stood. He waved a dismissive hand as the old soldier glanced at him suspiciously. “I’ll go find the captain. And maybe take a piss myself while I’m at it.”

“Here’s hopin’ you slip and bash your brains out.”

“Aye, just as long as you’re not cold and dead by the time I— Whoa!” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the man lost his footing and went down like a sack of bricks.

“What did I tell ya?” the old man cackled. “Hope you didn’t piss yourself.”

“Course I didn’t. Just slipped in the mud...” He patted the ground. It made an oddly viscous squelch.

“What’s wrong?” the old soldier called.

The large man raised his hand above his head for the moonlight to catch as it filtered through the trees.

“What in the...?”

His fingers, his palm—everything from the wrist down was drenched with red. Sticky droplets dripped down onto his cheek. He wiped them away on his arm and looked back, only to find that the old soldier was nowhere to be seen.

“Huh? Where’ve you gone, old man?”

He glanced around. The two watchmen were still at their posts, but the old soldier seemed to have vanished into thin air.

“Oy, did either of you see where he—?”

He grasped one of their shoulders and tried to pull the man around, but he went sprawling.

“You’ve gotta be shitting me...”

Both of them were headless, everything gone from the neck up. As the large man retreated in terror, the blood-soaked ground squished noisily beneath his feet.

“How much did I bloody have?”

With his head swimming in alcohol, it was hard to tell what was real. He could only pray that he was dreaming. Stumbling, he turned around and fled into the forest.

“Whole world’s gone bloody mad...”

His nerves screamed at him to run. His drunken stupor rapidly cooled to cold sobriety. His body could not follow so quickly, however, and he took more than a few tumbles as he ran desperately for the horses. At last, covered in scrapes and bleeding all over, he returned to the clearing.

“Erp...”

A squeal slipped from his throat, tiny for his size. The old soldier’s corpse hung from a tree before him. A boy dressed in black sat at the roots beneath it. He looked up with eyes darker than midnight.

“Agh!”

The man scrambled to draw his sword, but his arm wouldn’t listen. He looked down to see that it was severed at the shoulder. Screams resounded in the

darkness as he fell to the ground, writhing.

“Let’s get started, shall we? I doubt a grunt like you will have much to tell me, but you never know until you try.”

The boy’s boots crunched on the snow as he came closer, until he abruptly vanished from the man’s field of view.

“We have a long night ahead of us. Try to keep your mouth shut if you want. It’ll only make things more fun for me.”

A boot landed in the man’s back, smacking his face into the ground and sending him sprawling.

“What can you tell me about the Three Asuras? I’m particularly interested in Baal.”

Out of the corner of his eye, the man saw the boy holding his own sword. He hadn’t even seen him pick it up. With his one remaining arm, he waved his tormentor frantically away. “Stay back! Don’t you dare!”

The sword glinted as it bit into the flesh of his arm. Blood sprayed. His scream echoed in the night.

“That’s enough out of you.”

The soldier’s head fell with a grunt, leaving a trail of blood across the snow as it rolled. At last, it came to a stop next to a man’s feet—the captain who had been gone for so long. The man’s arms were bound and his mouth was stoppered by a rag.

“You’ll be sobering up around now, I expect.” Hiro reached down and removed the gag.

“What do you want?!” the captain pleaded. “I’ll tell you anything!”

“You can start by telling me about Baal.”

“I don’t know anything about the man! It’s true, I swear it! No one does, not even the prince!”

“And Prince Flaus allows someone so suspect to advise him?”

“The king trusted Baal, and so did the last king before that. Nobody has

worked harder for Lebering. The people love him.”

“I already know all that. What else can you tell me?” The blade flashed in Hiro’s hands.

The captain’s teeth chattered as he spoke. “I’ve no more to tell, I swear it! I’m only a captain—I don’t know the Asuras’ secrets!”

“I see. Next question, then. Why are you attacking the south?”

“Why? Why?! They started it! They killed our king and abducted our princess! If that’s not just cause, what is?! Half of them are human, anyway! They were working with the empire!”

“Did you see the king die? Did you see the princess kidnapped?”

The man fell silent at that.

“You only heard about it secondhand, didn’t you? This Baal told you, or perhaps Flaus. Am I wrong?”

“No, that’s right. They said some of the old nobles had a hand in it too.”

“And what happened to them?”

“Most were killed on the spot, or so I heard. The ones who were spared were thrown in the cells.”

“Naturally,” Hiro mused. “They kept the ones they could use and killed those they couldn’t.”

The captain looked at Hiro askance. He didn’t seem to follow, but Hiro showed no sign of explaining himself. He raised his sword.

The blood drained from the man’s face to see the blade glint dully in the dark. “Wait! Please! Don’t kill me!”

“Don’t worry. I still have questions for you.”

“Whatever you want to know!”

“All right. Who gave the order to butcher innocent civilians?”

“That was Lord Baal.”

“And did you take part in the looting?”

“Not once, honest! Most of the looters are criminals he conscripted!”

Lebering’s zlost blood might have thinned over the centuries, but more than half of the population was still unusually long-lived, and that was as true for criminals as it was for anybody else. Many of the kingdom’s penitentiary facilities were full to bursting. It seemed Flaus had taken advantage of the war to relieve that pressure by recruiting around five thousand offenders into his army.

“Their influence has been spreading among the soldiers. After Lord Baal gave the order, many of them took to pillaging. Not me, though! I take pride in my zlost blood, I would never—”

The man never finished his sentence. His head toppled from his shoulders.

“I can spot a liar, you know.”

Hiro threw the sword away. He took one last look at the corpse and its frozen stare before turning his back.

“It seems I’m running out of reasons to let Baal and Flaus live.”

With that, he vanished wordlessly into a darkness so deep, not even the moon’s light could pierce it.

*

It was early the next morning, before the break of dawn, when Hiro and the forces of the south caught up with the rebel army. The confrontation took place on a flat plain dotted with sparse outbreaks of trees.

Prince Flaus’s forces took to the field in three horizontal lines. They seemed undaunted by the prospect of battle. The first cohort arranged itself to spring into action at a moment’s notice, sending its archers to the fore and lining cavalry up behind to pounce on any opening in the enemy lines. A bloc of infantry reinforced the center.

“The spearhead formation,” Hiro mused. “Then we can’t expect them to go on the offensive.”

Also known as the turtle formation, the arrangement was designed to invite an enemy assault. It would taunt its prey with its unbreakable outer shell to lure

them closer before snapping out to devour them whole.

“I’d hoped they’d throw caution to the wind and try to overwhelm us, but they aren’t letting their numbers go to their head. The commander’s a tough nut to crack.”

Whoever was in charge of the enemy forces understood the rules of war. They wouldn’t attempt something as foolhardy as an all-out charge. Indeed, they were actively taking advantage of the fact that Hiro’s troops were less numerous by forcing them to go on the offensive.

“Well, we could do this the traditional way, but that wouldn’t be much fun.” Hiro hopped down from his carriage.

Claudia followed him. “Where are you going?” she asked.

He looked back over his shoulder and grinned. “To ask them to surrender.”

“Have you taken leave of your senses? Surely you cannot expect them to accept?” Her brow furrowed, she wheeled her horse around to block his way.

“Can I ask you to let me through?”

“Not without an explanation. You must know that my brother will not entertain your demands.”

Flaus’s army had thirty thousand men. They had only five. Surrendering against those odds was unthinkable—but then, that was the point.

“We need to knock them off-balance somehow,” Hiro said. “And they won’t see *this* coming.”

“I suspect that you will be met with disdain rather than surprise.”

“That’s why I plan on angering them too. They’ll need a little provocation before they take the bait.”

“So that’s your plan? To enter their ranks as an emissary and cause havoc?”

“It won’t be that easy. They won’t let me get close. I’ll have to address them from a distance.”

Claudia breathed a sigh of resignation, evidently tired of trying to keep up. “Very well. Do as you please. Would you have me do anything in the

meantime?”

“I’d appreciate it if you could ready a hundred riders. Tell them they’re to do *exactly* as I say.”

“I shall make certain of it.”

“I’ll have them fall back quickly enough, then go back to the plan. I’ll be counting on you.”

Claudia’s expression stiffened. “We’re walking a tightrope now, aren’t we?” she asked, her voice laden with anxiety. “We cannot afford even the slightest mistake.”

That was overstating it a little, Hiro thought. Even if his plan fell through, he could turn that failure into a later success. Anything short of total rout would be recoverable. Still, it would not be prudent to diffuse the tension overmuch. He didn’t want Claudia too nervous, but it wouldn’t do to let her get careless either.

In the end, he simply nodded in agreement. “See you on the other side,” he said, turning away, but then he spun back around with his arm outstretched. “Actually, can I borrow your bow and one of your arrows?”

“Not as such, but...” Claudia handed him the weapon and cocked her head quizzically as she watched him test its flex. “May I ask what you need it for? Will one arrow be enough?”

“Just watch. You’ll see soon enough.”

Smiling softly, Hiro set out for the front line. His black garb fluttered behind him, flapping at the air as he threaded through the soldiers’ uneasy ranks. He emerged into open space to feel the cold wind blowing over him, carrying the tension of the battlefield.

Before him, thirty thousand men stood arrayed across the snowfields. A ripple of surprise passed through them to see him approach alone, but any concern faded away as they realized that he was unarmed.

“Hear me, faithless rebels!” Hiro bellowed. “It is not too late to lay down your swords!”

His words carried clearly across the snowfields, but the enemy did not heed them. As Claudia had expected, their astonishment soon gave way to derision.

“Go back to sucking your mama’s tit, boy!”

Jeering laughter drifted back on the frozen wind.

Hiro grasped Excalibur’s hilt at his belt. “Then we will fight to the last man!” He drew the Heavenly Sovereign and held it high.

At this signal, the hundred riders at his back fanned out in a line and advanced. As the enemy archers drew back their bowstrings, Hiro thrust his arm out sideways.

“Halt!”

The riders kicked up a spray of snow as they skidded to a stop. At the same time, the sky darkened with enemy arrows. Hiro merely watched, unconcerned. He returned Excalibur to its sheath and raised his bow.

A breath later, the arrows fell, pouring down like a rain of gravel with a rumble that sent shivers down the spine. Wooden shafts carpeted the snow. The riders, however, suffered no casualties.

Disquiet spread through the enemy ranks to see that none of their targets had even been grazed.

Seeing his moment, Hiro raised his voice again. “Is this all the proud zlostas have to offer?! Truly, there is no more pathetic race in all of Soleil! Can your arrows only find women and children?!”

As his mockery settled in, the enemy’s front line broke. A hundred or so cavalry—a unit, perhaps—came charging toward them.

“Face me, coward!” A voice drifted across the snow. “I shall teach you to fear the zlostas!”

“No one takes bait like an idiot.” Hiro grinned to himself, then nocked his arrow. He drew back the bowstring, gauged the distance, and let loose.

The arrow whistled as it traced an arc through the air to land clean between the commanding officer’s eyes. A sickening crunch echoed across the battlefield. The man toppled from his horse, a lifeless corpse.

Hiro drew an enemy arrow from the ground and fired. Another soldier fell before he could get his bearings. Five more soon followed. With their commander slain and their comrades being picked off, the rebels' momentum petered out as the immediacy of their peril set in.

Hiro turned around to address the cavalry unit behind him. "To your positions. Let's teach them a lesson they won't forget."

"Yes, my lord!" The men raised their voices in unison and fell back.

Hiro returned his attention to the enemy riders, who were still in disarray. Lured far away from their lines, they were completely isolated.

"And as for you...you've served your purpose. Time to quit the stage."

He drew Excalibur once more and lunged forward, sending a plume of snow dancing behind him. He closed on them like striking lightning. The swipe of his blade was a gentle caress as it parted a goggle-eyed soldier's head from his shoulders.

Hiro ducked an incoming lance and sprang high into the air. The tip of Excalibur found his attacker's throat as he soared over the man's head, sending an arc of crimson spraying across the snow. As soon as he landed, he transitioned into a forward lunge to cleave a horse and rider in two.

"Yah!"

Moving too fast to see, he set about leading the enemy soldiers around by the nose. He ducked left, right, back, but invariably stepped in again to deal a killing blow. At last, the enemy army's first cohort realized that something was wrong. Their ranks began to move as they hastened to save their comrades.

Hiro lifted a hand to his eyepatch and smiled thinly.

"What are you, you monster?!" a soldier cried as he charged him down.

"You'll need to be faster than that."

He cut the man down with a single blow, then put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. The signal summoned Muninn on horseback.

"Over here, chief!"

Hiro grasped the man's hand and swung up onto the back of his horse. He turned to look back at the advancing enemy.

"Today, you'll see the depths of hell. You will writhe and scream in the flames of perdition." His lips pulled into a smile as he closed his fist around their ranks. "Do entertain me."

His voice sounded almost exhilarated before the drumming of horseshoes snatched it away.

*

Five thousand men ground into motion as the first cohort's turtle formation transformed. Two wings of cavalry unfurled to the sides. The infantry in the center broke into a run, heedless of their heavy armor.

This was one of Schwartz's eight formations, the dragon-wing formation. Named for its resemblance to a dragon taking flight, it was the one most frequently used in battle. Many nations favored it for its ease of transition from the spearhead.

"Are they trying to engulf us? My, how bold."

Claudia sounded almost impressed as she murmured to herself atop her horse. She turned to survey her own forces. The southern army awaited the enemy charge in a simple line, its soldiers now more eager than nervous after the enemy's gibes.

"Had we nothing up our sleeves, their numbers would likely overwhelm us."

Both armies numbered five thousand, but many of Claudia and Hiro's troops were wounded. In practical terms, they had only four thousand men. They had tried to obfuscate their numbers, but it was only a matter of time before the enemy cottoned on.

"There's still the question of how to best guide their momentum toward the center, and I must judge the right timing to signal the cavalry."

Claudia glanced around the surrounding terrain with a noise of consternation. Hiro had given her directions, but it fell to her to see them succeed, and she was not certain that she possessed the necessary decisiveness.

As she wrestled with her doubts, Huginn approached on horseback.

“I’ve spied out their formation, Your Ladyship!” the ex-sellsword cried. “They’ve cavalry to both sides, two thousand all told, and three thousand footmen in the center. The second cohort’s staying put. Seems the first came charging out all on its own!”

Perhaps they had mistaken their massacre of helpless commonfolk for evidence of strength. Perhaps the unfettered looting had degraded their chain of command. Perhaps the knowledge that they numbered thirty thousand had simply gone to their heads. Claudia set a finger to her daintily pointed chin and smiled. The enemy had numbers, but they seemed to expect a one-sided slaughter rather than a battle to the death. They lacked resolve.

With her course decided, she drew Hauteclaire from where it lay on her hip. “Raise the flags! The battle begins!”

Banners bearing the heraldry of Lebering unfurled all across the heart of the army. A horn blast shook the air. The cavalry on their flanks began to advance, churning up clouds of dust in its wake. The infantry braced for the enemy’s impact.

The blowing of the wind, the fluttering of the banners, the quiet music of the forest—all vanished beneath the approaching crunch of armored boots.

“Here they come!” Claudia cried. “Do not falter!”

The front line raised a mighty roar, and then battle was joined. Swords clanged and spear tips glinted, scattering sparks, spraying blood. Farther out, the southern army’s cavalry had also engaged their rebel counterparts. A plume of dust rose skyward where they clashed.

Huginn squinted at the melee. “Look, Your Ladyship! The center’s buckling!”

Claudia saw it too. The southern army’s center bowed inward as the soldiers began to flee. The rebels seemed to sense their enemy’s weakness and shifted their weight inward, concentrating their attacks on the breach. The princess, however, seemed unconcerned. If anything, she was pleased.

“It’s quite all right,” she said. “Lord Hiro will drive them back.”

“His Lordship’s there?!”

They had concentrated conscripted commonfolk in the center to create a deliberate weak point. *All for the sake of victory*, Hiro had said. It was a trick; a ruse to draw the enemy in while minimizing their own losses.

“The soldiers have lost their confidence. It will impede our future plans for them to grow too accustomed to retreat, so Lord Hiro decided upon this little charade. I had never imagined he might use the commonfolk so, but I daresay he will succeed in restoring the soldiers’ spirits.” Claudia looked back at the front line. “He is quite something, isn’t he? But then, what else would one expect from the scion of Mars?”

Fear would soon spread through the enemy ranks, if it had not already. Perhaps they were panicking even now, fighting desperately to escape the jaws of darkness. Claudia pictured the sight in her mind’s eye as she stared unflinchingly at the field.

*

The center had broken. The enemy was pouring through the breach. The soldiers of the southern army fought valiantly to hold them off, but the rebel onslaught was as vicious and implacable as a storm surge.

The middle files were made up of civilian units—conscripts from among the commonfolk. For most, this was their first battle. With no military training beyond whatever scraps of knowledge they already had, they were quick to buckle. Experience, resolve, discipline—they were deficient to the enemy in many respects, and all made themselves known as soon as the melee broke out.

Time to start pushing back. Morale is at rock bottom. The men could break and run at any moment.

This was the moment to bolster the troops’ confidence. If the conscripts fought hard, the rest would fight harder, and the army would grow in strength and cohesion. Encouraging that friendly rivalry had been one of Hiro’s goals when concocting this plan. It would ignite the soldiers’ flagging resolve, compensate for the conscripts’ weaknesses, and serve to invite the enemy in deeper.

“Out of my way, brat!” a charging soldier snarled.

“An opportunity like this won’t come by again. I have to make what use of it I can.”

“Agh!”

Hiro lopped off the man’s head. His body toppled to the ground, blood spraying from its severed stump.

“My men will feast on you and grow stronger, until they are the army I need them to be.”

A host of foes bore down on him, filling his vision. Furious battle cries shook the air. With an annoyed flick of Excalibur, Hiro sent one head rolling, then another, and another. Blood slicked the ground.

“This is the price you pay for your excesses. Now I will show you what fear truly is.”

He strode forward, the dreadful might emanating from him freezing his enemies in place.

“Raaaaaagh!”

The conscripts raised a cry as they charged past him, swords in hands. On the battlefield, hesitation meant death. Countless boots trampled the rebels where they fell.

Dishonorable though they might be, however, the enemy were still zlostas, and some were uncommonly hardy for foot soldiers. One such man stood on the field, brandishing a greatsword as long as he was tall. Viscera sprayed as his swings sent soldiers flying.

“Mongrel scum!” he roared. “You dare turn on your betters?!”

It would be dangerous to allow him to stall their momentum. Hiro caught the greatsword with a lazy motion—not with his blade, but with his hand.

“Weak.” He smirked. “If you’d been pureblood, I would have lost my fingers.”

“What... But... You...!” The man’s face contorted, not in rage but in surprise.

“It looks like you’re a mongrel too.”

Hiro released his grip on the greatsword and flourished Excalibur as its wielder's bulk lurched forward. A gentle wind blew around his enemy. A confused noise left the man's lips as his head slid oh-so-easily from his shoulders and struck the ground with a thud.

"Now, who's next?"

Hiro leveled his sword at the soldiers around him. They shrank back in fear. His eyes narrowed with disparagement for a moment, and then he was on them. They fought tooth and nail, but in vain; Excalibur's gleaming blade left only corpses in its wake.

The conscripts raised a battle cry as they charged along the trail of blood and gore that he created. With a heroic effort, they pushed the enemy back, and their fervor quickly spread throughout the rest of the troops. By the time Hiro finally stopped, bodies lay in heaps around him.

"Time to close out this battle," he said to the man before him. "With your death."

In front of him was the enemy commander, the last obstacle in his bloodstained path: Garius van Sarzand of the Three Asuras.

The tall man leaped down from his horse and grinned. "So, you take to the front lines yourself to rally your men! Consider me impressed! You fight like a true warrior." He drew his sword from his belt. With a quiet exhalation, he lifted it into a high guard. "But I would expect nothing less from Mars's progeny. It's enough to make a man's blood run hot!"

"Careful, now. The reaper loves overconfidence."

"I'll cut him down, and you besides! Then all the world will recognize my might!" Garius spread his legs wider and settled into a battle stance. His eyes flashed. "Besides, you would lecture me on arrogance? You, who fight on the vanguard yourself? You, who believe that your presence alone will turn the tide of battle? Please. I overestimate myself no more than you."

His blade slashed through the fetid air, but Hiro easily leaned out of the way.

"Your concern is touching but misplaced. I never overestimate myself. I learned that lesson the hard way a long time ago."

“Bold words, boy! We’ll see if you still look so smug with a scar across your face!”

Garius took a heavy step forward and unleashed a flurry of blows.

“Men like you all think fighting is nothing more than swinging a sword around,” Hiro said. “There’s no one simpler, no one easier to lure into doing what I want. Usually, I’d want to keep that kind of stupidity around, but this time I’m afraid I don’t have that luxury.”

He leaned back as the blade sliced past the tip of his nose, twisted aside to avoid a thrust at his abdomen, and kicked upward to knock it askew. With every attack dodged, his mind reclaimed a little space to breathe, which it used to predict and evade the next. In spite of Garius’s onslaught, he never moved one step from where he stood.

“Ngh... This...cannot be...”

In time, Garius began to tire. His movements slowed.

“The gulf between us...cannot be this great!”

The Asura’s attacks grew clumsier as his exhaustion mounted and his anger swelled. At last, one particularly wild swing bit into the earth. Hiro laid his foot on the blade and raised Excalibur to strike.

“Thanks for the fight back at the banquet. Unfortunately, it seems even the Asuras aren’t much of a challenge one-on-one.”

His slash carved Garius open from shoulder to hip, splitting ribs and tearing through vitals. Blood sprayed from the Asura’s chest. Even so, the man planted his feet on the earth and refused to fall.

“Gah! You make a fool of me again, boy. That I wouldn’t land a single blow...”

At last, his strength gave out and he crumpled to the ground, hacking up crimson gobbets. One last whisper passed his lips.

“Baal...will not fall...so easily...”

As the light left his eyes at last, a cheer went up from the southern army.

Hiro cast his eyes across the field. The rebels’ second cohort was stirring. They

must have realized that the first's offensive had gone wrong.

"That's one battle down. Now we just have to—"

Huginn rode up to interrupt him. "I spy movement from the enemy's second and third cohorts, Your Lordship! They're headed this way!"

Hiro grasped her outstretched hand and hoisted himself onto her steed. "Then it sounds like it's time for an orderly retreat. Do you have your banner?"

"Right here!"

Huginn took up the flag of Lebering hanging by her horse's flank and held it high. Horns sounded from the main body of the force and drums began to beat. As the clashing of swords faded from across the battlefield, a change came over the enemy's first cohort too. With Garius's death, they fell into retreat.

"Reform our ranks as we fall back. Tell the officers not to pursue."

There was still a healthy distance between the southern army and the enemy's second cohort. As long as nobody jumped the gun and rode out in search of glory, they would have the time to retreat safely and consolidate their defenses. Besides, the more enemies survived the day's massacre, the more their fear would infect their comrades, and the more strategies Hiro could devise to exploit it.

"Right away, Your Lordship!"

With a crisp reply, Huginn turned her horse about. As she left, Muninn cantered up on his own steed, covered in blood. He had clearly been in the thick of the fighting.

"You know," he observed lazily, "zlosta ain't all that much different from humans. Stick 'em and they fall over just the same."

Hiro could not help but be impressed. "Good work, Muninn. I daresay the day is yours."

"You mean it? Thank the gods! Now the boss won't be after my hide!"

Muninn raised his spear above his head and let out a whoop of joy.

*

“The rebel army has fallen back and set up camp, sir,” the soldier said, his head bowed. “At last count, they were at rest.”

Hiro, back with the main force, was busy reading a report. It was not clear whether he was listening.

The soldier’s brow creased, but he continued. “It appears that they are sending out scouts. What would you have us do?”

Hiro at last looked up from the sheet of paper. The fallen snow glowed a fiery red in the setting sun, sending flecks of smoldering embers dancing across the soldier’s armor, although the effect owed just as much to the blood spattering his steel.

“Tell the commanders of units seven through ten to lie in wait and capture them,” Hiro ordered.

The fighting was over for the time being. He had prepared defenses against a night raid as a precaution, but it was unlikely that the enemy intended to mount one.

“Yes, sir.” The soldier brought his left hand to his chest with a clatter.

Hiro stowed the report in his pocket. “Oh, and instruct the officers that they are to remain watchful of our surroundings.”

“As you command!”

Once the soldier was out of sight, Hiro set out to the scheduled strategy meeting.

“I’d hoped to chip away two or three thousand more of them, but no matter.”

The southern army’s camp was sandwiched by woodland to the east and west. Hiro had chosen the spot in case the rebel army pursued, but the precaution had proved unnecessary. Apparently, some among the rebels were thinking clearly enough not to let their anger get the better of them. Still, he welcomed the opportunity to let the soldiers rest early.

“And morale is up. That’s the real victory. Now we just have to make our next move before the enemy tries to retake the initiative.”

Hiro entered the tent to find Claudia, Huginn, and Muninn waiting inside. The

meeting would only include the four of them to begin with. The officers would arrive once they had taken stock of their units' losses.

Huginn and Muninn made to bow, but he raised a hand to stay them. "At ease. We'll start by going over how things stand."

He made his way to the table in the center of the tent. A map of southern Lebering was unfurled atop it. Pawns indicated where traps had been laid.

"As you please." Claudia nodded. "First, our enemy's losses. We estimate that their first cohort has been depleted by two thousand men, three thousand including severe and walking wounded. As for us, we have lost around a thousand, wounded included. That leaves us with around three thousand men able and willing to fight."

She placed a pawn on top of their current location.

"Our spies report no changes in the enemy encampment. In other words, they have yet to make a move."

She laid down another pawn a short distance away, where Flaus's army made their camp.

"They appear set on maintaining a defensive position. One might conclude that the first cohort's defeat has made them cautious."

"You sure that's all there is to it?" Huginn interrupted. "They ain't budged an inch since they made camp. Save for sending out looters, that is."

Claudia's brow creased. "Do you believe that they are planning something?"

"I figure it's likely. They've got the numbers, but they ain't using 'em. Weird is what it is. They're up to something, mark my words."

"A night raid, perhaps?" Claudia glanced at Hiro.

He shook his head. "I don't think it's likely. If there's no movement in their camp, they mustn't have started preparing, but they've left it too late to field a large force without being detected."

Aside from anything else, the enemy would have to rebuild the first cohort after the damage it had suffered, which would leave it with no time to organize a nocturnal offensive. The second and third cohorts were still unscathed, but it

would be foolish to erode their numbers in battle when they would be needed in the weeks ahead.

“They might try to catch us by surprise, but we’re prepared for a night raid, and we’ve laid plenty of traps.”

They had control. Things were proceeding smoothly. It was time to make their next move.

“We’ll stage a night raid of our own,” Hiro announced.

Claudia’s eyebrows rose. “I cannot imagine we will find them unprepared.”

For as long as military strategy had existed, a night raid had been a staple means of overturning a numerical disadvantage. Needless to say, however, it was no use if the enemy saw it coming.

“I’m not talking about doing anything that would lose us men. Just making noise and spreading confusion.”

“Then I presume your aim is to tire the enemy out. But we do not have the numbers to cover for the men we would use.”

She was right. There would be no point in exhausting the enemy if a significant portion of their own troops would also be too sleep-deprived to fight.

Hiro only nodded. “That’s fine. We won’t be fighting tomorrow. They’ll have the chance to rest.”

“We won’t?” Claudia’s slender eyebrows pulled together doubtfully.

“How can you say that, Your Lordship?” Huginn interjected, alarmed. She didn’t seem to have followed Hiro’s reasoning. Still, walking her through it would only encourage her to rely on him for answers. He would prefer that she thought about the problem herself.

As he wondered how best to handle the matter, an unfamiliar soldier burst into the tent.

“My apologies for interrupting, Your Highness!”

The man was breathing hard. With fumbling hands, he produced two letters

from his pocket. Hiro looked them over, then glanced at the soldier's arm. It bore a white armband embroidered with the numeral V.

"You're from the Fifth Legion?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The Knights of the White Fangs."

The Knights of the White Fangs fell under the personal command of the second prince. It would not be an overstatement to say that this man was a messenger from Selene himself. The letters he proffered, bowing deeply, were probably from the prince too.

Hiro took the letters, unfolded the first, and expelled a sigh. "There's nothing here but your name."

The letter was blank but for a small note verifying the carrier's identity. Hiro showed it to the messenger. The man blanched and pressed his forehead to the ground.

"H-His Highness says that talk can wait until you meet face-to-face." His voice trembled, like a man anticipating a death sentence—as was indeed the penalty for deceiving a member of the royal family.

"Relax," Hiro said. "I'm not offended." With a sigh, he settled into a chair. The intent of the blank letter was clear—Selene was giving him the opportunity to appeal for reinforcements. "Where is the second prince right now?"

"His Highness is gathering his forces near the Lebering border. He is ready to move as soon as you send word."

"If I wrote to him for aid, how quickly could he get here?"

"I would estimate eight days, Your Highness."

"Good. Then I have a message for him." Hiro gestured for a sheet of paper from Claudia and handed it to the soldier. "Tell him that I have defeated the rebel army."

"Excuse me?" three voices said—Claudia, Huginn, and Muninn.

Hiro approached the messenger and clapped him on the shoulder. "You won't be lying to him. By the time you reach him, it will be true."

“But, Your Highness...” The man didn’t seem to believe him. His expression turned deeply uneasy.

“If you’re concerned, there’s no need to set out right away. Put some food in your belly. Rest your feet.”

Hiro turned his attention outside and called for one of the sentries. One came running.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Bring this man something to eat and ready him a fresh horse.”

“At once, Your Highness. This way, if you please.”

The messenger left the tent, escorted by the sentry, looking confused all the while. Hiro turned back to Claudia and the others to find them glaring at him. Their eyes demanded explanations.

“I’ll be happy to answer questions if you have them. But first...let’s see how our enemy responds.”

Hiro’s smile deepened as he cast his gaze over the map.

Chapter 5: Wisdom and Foolishness

An oppressive silence hung over the rebel army's command tent. The first cohort's losses were the biggest reason, but there was also a shared indignation that humans—and conscripted commonfolk, at that—had dealt the proud zlosta such a humiliating defeat.

"For haste's sake, I shall abridge the details, but the essence of the matter is that over half of the first cohort is no longer fit for battle."

"I never would have imagined they would fall for such an obvious ruse."

"It's the price we pay for forming a regiment of common criminals. No notion of discipline. They act only to satisfy their base cravings."

"Can the cohort be reformed? It would be a sore loss."

Several advisors conversed in the middle of the tent, their faces uniformly grave. All knew that there was little hope of reforming the first cohort. Its officer class, including its commander, Garius van Sarzand, had been annihilated in the battle.

"We could promote lower-ranking officers to the positions. Have them fill in temporarily."

"Even assuming they could fill those boots, who would take overall command?"

"There's no one left who's seen enough battles. We'd be dooming the cohort in the next engagement."

Lebering had sheltered beneath the aegis of the empire for many years. Decades had passed since it had last known war. Most of the younger soldiers had only ever fought monsters and bandits.

"Where's Lord Baal got to?" one of the advisors wondered aloud. "We need his guidance."

"He's not been seen since the first cohort's defeat," an older man answered.

“Do you know where he is?”

“No one does. He’s been acting strange ever since he saw Mars’s scion take to the field.”

“Blasted shame the boy didn’t run when he had the chance. Now that he’s with the southern army, he’s causing us no end of grief. Have you ever known anyone to handle a bow like that?”

“The troops are saying he took Garius’s head himself.”

“Hmph. When all’s told, he’s a mortal man like all the rest. We can think of ways to outfox him later. For now, we need to rebuild our forces.”

As the last man’s words left his mouth, the tent went silent. Baal, the last remaining Asura, stood in the entryway.

“Send the first cohort to the rear,” the hooded man commanded. “They will be our reserves. Consider them spare bodies to put wherever they will be most useful. Perhaps we could integrate them into our other units, but I doubt many will welcome criminals.”

The advisors bowed in unison. Baal acknowledged them with a nod, then he strode to the center of the tent and looked down at the map laid out on the ground. As usual, his hood hid his face and rendered his expression unreadable, but none questioned it.

“My lord, if I may, where have you been?” an advisor asked.

“Relaying the events of the battle to Prince Flaus.”

“When you were so urgently needed on the field?”

Baal’s mouth, all that peeked out from beneath the shadow of his hood, curled into a smile. “We needed to lose our first battle in order to light a fire beneath our soldiers’ heels. All that matters is that the second cohort is not affected. Besides, my presence was not required. You managed well enough by yourselves.”

“You mean to say that you anticipated this?”

“I did. Well, I did not expect Garius to fall, but that is neither here nor there. He was not a popular commander. He too often let his love of battle go to his

head.”

“And the first cohort was where we assigned the criminals,” the advisor mused. “As far as the rest of the army was concerned, they were nothing but a nuisance.”

“I will admit,” Baal conceded, “Mars’s scion lending his aid to Haniel’s forces did catch me by surprise. I had expected him to flee. The rest, however, fell well within my expectations.”

An aged man stroked his gray-flecked beard as he turned to the Asura. “Then how should we proceed, my lord?”

“The last battle ought to have cured our troops of any reckless disobedience. Our strategy remains unchanged. We focus all of our efforts on defeating the southern army.”

“Then we shall—”

A sudden noise interrupted the advisor. Drums were beating outside.

“Are we under attack?!”

The men paled. They stood, ready to rush out to see what was happening.

“Hold,” Baal commanded. “We will only set the soldiers ill at ease by venturing out in disarray. No matter what you see, do not panic.”

He took up position at their head and led them through the tent flap. Although the sun had set and darkness now pressed in from all around, the starlight from above and the bonfires around the camp rendered it light enough to see. In every direction, soldiers looked around in confusion, but any plumes of fire or other material signs of attack were notably absent.

“I see. A childish trick.” Baal flagged down an officer as he hurried past and addressed the man with cool clarity. “Our enemy is playing games. We will not entertain them. Put an end to this unsightly racket. Triple the palisades, set up more bonfires, change the watch every hour, and instruct the officers to launch fire arrows at anything that makes so much as a squeak. That should quiet them.”

“At once, my lord!”

As the man left, the elderly advisor approached Baal. “What do you suppose they’re planning, my lord?” he asked.

“Perhaps they balked upon seeing that our defenses were heavier than they expected and are now trying to exhaust us. Perhaps they are trying to cause confusion to give their spies an opportunity to slip into our camp. One of the two, I don’t doubt.” Baal’s voice was absolutely confident in his assessment. “Now, get some sleep. We’re in no danger of being attacked so long as we’re not foolish enough to take their bait.”

He pulled his hood lower over his face and turned away.

“Where are you going, my lord?” the advisor asked after him.

“To reassure Prince Flaus. This disturbance will have unsettled him.”

Baal strode away, muttering to himself as he went.

“They walk the same. Carry themselves the same. And the presence I sensed was his. Mars’s blood must run as thick as it ever did.” He turned over long-faded memories in his mind as he walked. “And they have the same penchant for provocative tactics. It is as though I fight Schwartz himself. At last, I have the chance to fulfill our lord’s final wish and avenge these thousand years of shame. I will kill this scion of Mars. I must.”

The upheaval in the camp had subsided by the time he reached Prince Flaus’s tent. The inside was dark, and an unpleasant gloom hung in the air.

“How are you feeling?” Baal asked the darkness.

A shape stirred within. “Well enough,” came a short reply.

“You did admirably, Your Highness. Your resilience has earned you a place as one of our lord’s dead champions.”

“I am dead, then?”

“Oh, yes, quite dead. It took thirteen thousand lives to recall your soul. Only human lives, unfortunately, but what’s a man to do?”

Flaus grinned. “As long as they are not kin, I care not how many you spend. I am only surprised that the power of the Origin came at so cheap a price.”

Baal's lips curled at that word, but he otherwise said nothing. His figure shuddered in the darkness.

"Is something amiss?" Flaus asked.

Baal's silhouette shook its head. "Not at all. More importantly, I bring urgent news. The second prince of the empire is summoning troops to the border from all across his lands. There look to be fifty thousand in all. If the fourth prince should send for aid, they will be here in eight days."

"And we have only thirty thousand. Less, now, with the first cohort's losses."

"Indeed, but there is nothing to fear. Every plan they might make is plain as day to me. We need only wait for them to act and see which they choose."

An amused titter echoed in the darkness. The air creaked and swirled, growing ever more foul.

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Stars studded the sky like jewels. The night wind cut to the bone, but the moon's glow was soft and warm. By its light, Hiro looked over a letter—the same letter that the second prince's messenger had delivered alongside his own blank missive. It came from Liz, who even now was bound for Faerzen at the head of twenty thousand men. Faerzen's well-maintained roads had allowed the enemy easy ingress, but the reverse would also be true; it would take her only three days after sending the letter to meet up with Aura.

The Faerzen Resistance worries me, but I need to see things through in Lebering first.

Too many things didn't add up in this conflict, more than he could hope to shine a light on in a single day. He needed to penetrate his enemy's schemes by tomorrow, or the day after that at the latest.

If only I had the time to play around with them a bit longer...

He returned to his tent, unfurled a map on the ground, and sat down.

I need to push them into doing something, anything. But how?

As he stared down at the map, the imperial border caught his eye. Prince Selene was massing his forces there at that very moment... But no, that chalice

was very much poisoned. Taking it could mean the end of Lebering.

But if I can make the enemy think I'm going for it, maybe they'll slip up.

He gave a discontented *hrmm*, touched his fingers to his eyepatch, and expelled a small sigh.

I'll give them a good shake. Maybe something will fall out.

If the enemy took the bait, it would be all the easier to ensnare them in his schemes and lead them to destruction. He sank deeper and deeper into a fugue, placing pawn after pawn on the map, devising and discarding ideas.

"Your Lordship?"

Hiro looked up to see Huginn on one knee before him. With some surprise, he realized his focus must have been so intense that he hadn't even noticed her come in.

"Back with us, are you?" she said with a wry smile. "Five times I had to call you. What if I'd snuck in with a blade? I know you keep us all close by, but we can't be with you in an eyeblink."

That, at least, was not a concern. He would have sensed a would-be killer's bloodlust, and even if a prospective assassin disguised their intent, the Black Camellia would not be fooled.

"What are you doing here so late?"

"I saw your light was still on. Figured you could use a bite to eat."

Huginn's tent was not far from Hiro's own. Concerned for her safety with so few other women in the army, he had made certain to keep her close by. Muninn shared her accommodations, earning the jealousy of most of his comrades in the process.

"It's not much," she added. "Just soup and bread."

"No, thank you. I was just starting to get hungry."

She set herself down opposite him and looked idly over the map. "Are you always up this late? Thinking up strategies night after night?"

"Not every night. Sometimes I turn in early."

“But not tonight?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Too much to think about.”

“What if I slept beside you? Would that help?”

Whatever leap of logic she had performed to come out with *that* idea, Hiro couldn’t follow it. “I’ll be fine. Now that I’ve had something to eat, I’ll be out like a light.”

“Then how about I sing you a lullaby? You know, for sweet dreams.”

How was she coming up with this? Hiro pressed a hand to his brow as his head began to throb. “Maybe not,” he said with a shrug. “I wouldn’t want the troops to find out.”

Huginn’s brow furrowed as she narrowed her eyes. “The boss said lots of generals show their strength by keeping women on their arm. You saying he was wrong?”

Hiro shook his head, internally cursing Garda and his loose lips. It was true that some commanders employed arm candy to demonstrate their authority, but that had its drawbacks. In the present situation, the troops would respond poorly to the practice.

“Let’s just drop it for today. Head back to your tent and get some rest.”

“And leave you without a guard? Not on your life.”

Huginn clearly wasn’t going to be persuaded. Most likely, she just wanted to stay because she enjoyed his company. As Hiro sighed, an idea came to him.

“Fine,” he said. “You can help me think.”

Trading thoughts with someone else could inspire ideas that would never occur alone.

“You mean it, Your Lordship?!” Huginn’s eyes flew open, sparkling with delight.

Hiro nodded and placed another pawn on the map.

*

The next morning, Hiro’s southern army faced off again with the rebels. Their

formation was orderly. Despite their lesser numbers, their faces betrayed no flicker of fear.

The rebels, too, were invigorated. They raised fierce battle cries in the early morning air, proclaiming for all to hear that they were willing to fight at any time—a show likely meant to break the southern army's spirits.

"How would you resolve this standoff, Lord Hiro?" A sweet voice rose above the foe's taunts to ring in Hiro's ears.

"Hm?" He looked to his side.

Claudia stood next to his carriage, surveying the enemy lines with keen eyes. Hiro followed her gaze. The rebels lay in wait in exactly the same formation they had adopted the previous day.

"How would you defeat us if you were in their place?"

Hiro nodded thoughtfully. "I'd make a deliberate blunder and gauge how we responded. I might end up paying for it, but it would still be better than an endless staring contest."

"Then why do you suppose they don't?"

"Perhaps they're still scoping out the field. Or perhaps they have a plan that we don't know about."

Claudia nodded in understanding. "An ambush, then. Perhaps they're sending their forces behind us to catch us unawares."

"If they were, they'd be trying harder to provoke us. Besides, the terrain's against them. We have too good a view from here."

If an enemy detachment tried to sneak around through the snowfields, the scouts would spot them immediately. Such a force would have to be hiding in the woods, but that would require the rest of the rebel force to draw the southern army near so they could spring their trap—or at least, such was Hiro's reasoning.

He surveyed the battlefield. "I don't see any signs of an ambush. As far as I can tell, the enemy means to stay right where they are."

"Staring us down won't win them any victories," Claudia said, eyeing the rebel

lines suspiciously.

Hiro shrugged. "At the end of the day, what they're trying to do is none of our business. We can just do what we like."

He called a messenger over.

"Yes, Your Highness?" the man said.

"Command the vanguard to advance," he instructed. "The rest of the army is to proceed as planned."

"At once!" The messenger bowed and cantered away.

Next, Hiro beckoned Muninn. He whispered a sentence or two in the man's ear, then handed him a scroll. Muninn stowed the paper carefully in his chest pocket and inclined his head.

"Don't put yourself in too much danger," Hiro said.

"No worries on that score, chief. I run just as well as I fight."

"Still, if anything goes wrong, abandon the plan and flee. This isn't worth risking your life over."

"You got it, chief. See you on the other side."

With one last bow, Muninn left. At that moment, the vanguard ground into motion. As a cloud of dust rose over the front lines, Claudia mounted her horse and approached once more.

"It's time for me to be away," she said. "Are you quite certain you will be all right?"

Hiro answered the concern in her eyes with a breezy shrug. "I'll be fine. You've got the more important job, anyway."

"Perhaps, but if the enemy were to realize what you're up to..."

"Then I suppose I'll mount a heroic charge and go out in a blaze of glory."

"That would be quite the sight, I'm sure." Claudia giggled into the back of her hand before turning her horse about. "But time is pressing, and I have duties to attend to."

She merged with her unit and rode away. Once she was out of sight, Hiro returned his gaze to the fore, where a curtain of snowflakes swirled in the wind.

“That’s all the pieces in place,” he whispered to himself with the faintest hint of amusement. “Now all that’s left to do is run.”

He gestured to the standard-bearer, who unfurled a great flag of Lebering. The army began to advance—not forward, nor to the sides, but gently backward.

At that moment, a messenger emerged from the blizzard that blanketed the battlefield. “Lord Hiro!” the man shouted. “The enemy is holding position. Our vanguard has deployed to the flanks to intercept the first cohort.”

“Order them to fall back. Once we’ve gained enough distance, we’ll make camp and rest.”

There was no need to waste valuable energy. If they tired themselves out, they would be done for.

As the southern army receded, the rebels decided that enough was enough and moved forward to close the distance. Even so, they maintained their defensive posture. Jeers and taunts rose from their lines, but nothing more. Hiro ignored them and continued his steady retreat.

The moving standoff lasted all throughout the day, until the sun set and night descended.

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“I see they’re back again tonight,” Baal remarked. “Making noise and little else.”

He and his advisors were again in the command tent in the middle of their encampment. Their strategy meeting had concluded, but the advisors remained, looks of uncertainty on their faces. They hesitated to return to their tents for fear of an enemy attack.

“My lord, is there truly nothing to be done about this din?” one pleaded. “I’ve barely slept a wink, and it’s making the soldiers nervous.”

Baal understood the man’s frustration. The enemy showed no sign of actually

attacking, but they were beating drums, blowing flutes, and generally making a racket. The ploy was making it impossible to rest, and the effects on the army's mental state were undeniable.

"We have already taken defensive measures. You may return to your tents secure that you will come to no harm."

There was nothing to be gained from taking the enemy's bait and riding out. They would find footprints at best and an ambush at worst.

"We have better things to do than waste our energy chasing after shadows," Baal concluded. "Pay them no attention."

"But, my lord..."

The advisors' faces said plainly that while they understood his point, they did not find it satisfactory. Reassurances would not help them sleep any more soundly when the enemy was raising a ruckus just next door. The fact of the matter, however, was that there was nothing they could do but plug their ears.

"Our guard is too tight for them to attempt a night raid," Baal snapped, "and that is my final word on the matter. If anybody raises it again, I will stuff their ears with cotton and put them to sleep myself."

He looked down at the map on the desk. The enemy's movements earlier in the day had been unusual on several counts. The vanguard had raised a great cloud of dust, and by the time it had dispersed, a thousand men were missing. Baal had naturally sent out scouts into the surrounding forest after the vanished soldiers, but he had found no trace of them. With the rest of the southern army retreating, he had eventually given up the search and pursued the main force.

In the end, despite remaining wary of potential ambushes, nothing had happened all day. It seemed the men had truly vanished. Even so, it was hard to believe that the enemy had no plan. If there had been no reason for their split, the forces left behind would have shown signs of confusion, but their defense had remained impeccable over the course of their retreat.

"Perhaps they're aiming to buy time to join forces with the Fifth Legion. Well, let them try."

The second prince's forces would outnumber Baal's if they arrived in time, but

if the southern army was relying on that faint hope, its commander was frankly naive.

“If that’s their play, we’ll crush them before they make it.”

He had yet to take the full measure of Mars’s scion, but he had seen enough to tell that the man would be dangerous at the head of a larger army.

As he pondered, a point on the map caught his attention. He narrowed his eyes. “Interesting. If this southward course continues, it will take us past Schnee Fortress.”

As likely as not, the southern army intended to hole up there until the Fifth Legion’s arrival, at which point they would trap Baal between the two forces. Indeed, that was their only chance at victory. Baal had already foreseen the wisest plans they could make. The battlefield lay in the palm of his hand.

“Lord Baal,” one of the advisors said, “there is one other thing. Our scouts found this.” The man held out a scroll of paper.

Baal suspended his pondering and had the man read it. Within was a plea for aid to the Fifth Legion.

“And how exactly did this fall into their hands?” he asked.

“The scouts happened across a suspected enemy soldier on reconnaissance. The man got away, but he dropped this as he fled.”

“Oh? How convenient for us, that our foe should misplace such an important document.”

Baal’s smile grew wider. This was base intimidation, a foolish play. If the enemy commander had any sense, he would be ashamed at having sealed his own doom. Baal could not help but grin as mirth swelled in his chest.

“How tragically idiotic. I imagine they hoped to broaden their options. Instead, they have culled them to none.”

Most likely, they had fed the letter into his hands to redirect his attention to the Fifth Legion, or perhaps even to convince him to drop his pursuit entirely and go after the second prince instead.

“Irony. All they have told me is that I have nothing to fear.”

They needn't have dropped this letter to remind him of the Fifth Legion's presence. He had kept it constantly in mind since the conflict had begun. They had dug their own graves and gained nothing for the trouble.

"An arrogant ploy. Did they truly believe they could defeat me with fewer than three thousand men? It will be all too easy to outwit such presumptuousness." Baal narrowed down his long list of schemes, searching for the one that would most efficiently drive their foe to ruin. "If they mean to make their last stand at Schnee Fortress..."

Ah, there he had it. They planned to hole up there and occupy his attention while their vanished detachment struck from behind. And considering their fewer numbers, the attack was all but guaranteed to come at night.

"So that is the purpose of all this nighttime racket. They mean to lull us into complacency."

But now Baal had seen through their plans. He would bury the War God's scion in the grave he had dug for himself, shatter the second prince's army, and lay waste to the northern territories...and in time, the rest of the empire would fall too.

"The time is nigh for the zlosta to erase our old disgrace. Soon, Soleil will know the terror of our rule once more."

But until then, he would enjoy watching this would-be War God succumb to despair as his foolish schemes fell apart around him.

*

The twenty-fifth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1023

Again, the day saw the two armies face off in silence. Hiro yawned as he surveyed the rebel ranks from his commanding position to the rear of the southern forces.

"Another day of nothing. Good for us, but it does get dull."

No blood stained the battlefield. No clashing of steel echoed across the snow. There were only two armies hurling jeers at one another. Soon enough, Hiro mused, even their taunts would become rote.

An advisor approached him. "It is time, Lord Hiro. What shall we do?"

"Fall back, just like yesterday. If the enemy comes after us, shower them with arrows, then reverse course and meet them."

At times like these, smaller numbers could be advantageous. The enemy would flinch to see weaker prey turning around to bite, sending their ranks into disarray: an effect that would quickly snowball throughout the entire army. Their losses would be severe, and their faces would be slate-gray by the time they finally rebuilt their fighting force.

"Their numbers will make them overconfident. Their commanders might be cautious, but their prudence won't carry through to the lower ranks, especially in an army so lacking in discipline."

That would be all the more true if the troops were riding high on burning towns and slaughtering innocent civilians. The ease of it would only swell their egos.

"We'll retreat as planned," Hiro concluded.

He gestured to the standard-bearer. The army began to reenact the motions of the previous day. The distance between the two forces slowly grew, but the rebels showed no sign of closing it. Soon enough, another sunset arrived without them trading anything more than glares.

The sun sank and the moon rose, as the laws of nature decreed. The southern army made their camp, set up a vigilant watch, and began to rest. With the troops permitted a small amount of alcohol, the atmosphere was lively, and soldiers chatted merrily in small groups throughout the encampment.

Hiro summoned the officers to the commander's tent in the center. They assembled around a long table, every face drawn with anxiety. All of their eyes were on Hiro in the head seat.

"After observing the enemy's actions today," he announced in lieu of a greeting, "I have made some deductions."

The officers' eyes grew wider at that.

"Does this mean you've divined their plans, sir?" one man asked.

With a self-assured smile, Hiro nodded. "I cannot say for certain, but yes, I am confident."

"Then ought we adjust our strategy?"

"No, we will proceed as planned. As I said, I mean to use all of your proposals."

He had made a promise and he intended to keep it. If possible, he wanted every one of his advisors' ideas to see the light of day.

One officer still had the shadow of doubt on his brow. "Is it wise to be so inflexible in our approach?" he asked. "Does that not risk defeat?"

"That's what I'm here for. To lead you to victory." Hiro gestured to the map and picked up a pawn from the side of the table. He pushed it westward until it reached a fort. "Tomorrow we will retreat to Schnee Fortress, making it clear all the while that we are setting up a trap. That is where we will make our final stand and where all of our plans will come to fruition."

On that day, the snow would run red, as though a great crimson flower had blossomed in the north.

"We want to avoid any unnecessary engagements before then. Still, it wouldn't be much fun if all we did was run. We'll send a few units out again tonight to keep them on their toes, tire them out, lull them into a false sense of security. Then we'll crush them in one fell swoop."

Hiro's voice carried a confidence that brooked no argument. Someone swallowed.

"As you command, my lord," one of the advisors finally responded. "We will see it done."

"I'm happy to field any questions you might have. If you're uncomfortable asking them here, my tent is always open. You need hold nothing back." He looked over their faces for a long moment, then drew a quiet breath and continued. "Nothing? Good. Then this meeting is adjourned."

With that, the officers bowed in unison, straightened upright, and left the tent. In the absence of their body warmth, the air rapidly cooled. Hiro settled

down in his chair, laid his elbows on the table, and settled his chin atop his clasped hands. He lowered his gaze to the map.

“They think they’ve already won. Let’s prove them wrong.”

A smile pulled at his lips as he touched his fingers to his eyepatch. He picked up several pawns and lined them up in a row. A plethora of schemes raced through his mind, and his left eye itched to try them all.

“After this will come Faerzen, and Draal, and Steissen, and then the nations farther west. Not all will oppose us, of course, but nevertheless...”

Once he had no more enemies left in Soleil, he would turn his attention across the sea, to the landmasses to the north and west—although it was more than likely that they would come to him.

“Ah, of course. And the eastern islands too.”

They were a harsh place where beastfolk dwelled and monsters prowled. The beastfolk were a warlike people, but certain circumstances prevented their expansion. As long as he left them alone, they were unlikely to openly move against him.

“They might be a rogue element. I don’t know how things have changed while I’ve been gone.”

Even so, he had many options to choose from, and his opportunities to test himself would only grow. He toppled the pawns one by one until only the last remained. He stared at it for a while.

“And then there’s the Grantzian Empire.”

A thousand years had seen the empire grow beyond anything Hiro could have imagined. With the power it now commanded, it was ruler of the continent; a force the other nations would have to band together to have any hope of opposing. Still, that didn’t mean there weren’t cracks in its foundation.

“The emperor isn’t weak, exactly, but the nobles are too strong.”

At some point, he would have to focus his attention inward or the domestic situation would deteriorate beyond saving. Preserving a balance between the five great houses would be essential.

“I could raise up a new faction of undeclared nobles and pit them against House Krone, but that might end up handing one house all the power for generations to come.”

New factions rose quickly, and their momentum made them dangerous. They would quickly swallow all who opposed them. One wrong hand on the rudder was all it would take for the empire to collapse. He had to proceed with caution if he wanted to avoid that, and shore up the eastern nobles’ power as he went.

“There is much to be done. I don’t have time to waste squabbling with rebels.” Hiro knocked over the final pawn and rose. His black garb swirled about him as he turned toward the tent flap. “First, I’ll put an end to this pointless war. I can’t let the past shackle me any longer.”

His footsteps resounded unusually loudly as he touched his fingers to his eyepatch and stepped outside, leaving the tent deserted but for the howling of the wind.

As the flap fell shut behind him, the shadows clinging to the corners of the empty tent churned and twisted, until they resolved into the shape of a man. The figure grinned eerily as it began to dance with wild abandon.

The darkness spread, unheard and unseen, like water seeping into wool.

*

The twenty-sixth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1023

Dusk was falling when the southern army finally displayed a change in tactics.

“Oh?” Baal mused. “Hoping to blind us, are they?”

He sat in a roofless carriage in the center of the rebel formation. Before him, a torrent of snowflakes danced, thick enough to obscure the enemy lines.

“They do love their games. As though I would fall for such a childish trick.”

He pulled a map close and studied it, toying with a pair of pawns as he ruminated. Schnee Fortress was close. He had already dispatched scouts to inspect it, and they had reported that its defenses would not withstand a siege.

“Such a fragile gate will easily fall before the battering rams we’ve made.”

If the enemy did as he expected, the effort of crafting the rams would be well worthwhile. If his predictions were accurate, they would take advantage of the snowstorm to retreat at full speed, turning to attack if his forces tried to pursue. It would be possible to finish them off there and then, but he could not afford a messy skirmish with a mere three thousand—not with a battle against the second prince looming on the horizon.

“Lord Baal!” came a cry from a messenger. “The enemy is falling back at full speed!”

His smile grew wider. Next, they would doubtless flee to Schnee Fortress and hole up like a tortoise in its shell.

“And if we’re too eager to chase them, their vanished detachment will fall on us from behind.”

One thousand men had split off from the southern army shortly after the two sides had made contact on the previous day. Most likely, they were lying low somewhere behind Baal’s forces, ready to strike once he attacked Schnee Fortress. That, he could not allow to happen.

“I could dispatch a force to intercept them...” he mused.

But if the enemy saw through his plans, that force would inevitably end up caught between two sides. That would buy no time and lose men for nothing.

“Then I’ll crush their plots before they can come to fruition. I have no intention of playing along with their games. I will finish this by tonight.” He beckoned the messenger closer. “Tell every officer in the army that once we have encircled Schnee Fortress, they are to be wary of the rear.”

“At once, my lord!” The man departed.

As Baal stared after the retreating army, his mind began to turn.

Now a night raid is their only hope.

They were clearly laying the foundations, staging dummy attacks night after night to induce overconfidence. The vigilance of the soldiers on the ground would be dwindling. If a night raid struck the army now, the effect would be devastating.

And their ploy might have succeeded if I hadn't seen through it. As it is, they will find us ready and waiting.

The commander had spun his web cleverly, laying plans to account for every eventuality. His strategy was textbook—perfectly polished, and perfectly predictable.

Hardly a challenge, for a scion of Mars. His ancestor overshadows him yet.

After foiling the night raid and lowering the enemy's morale, Baal would strike them where they cowered in the fortress. The final battle would take place that very night.

His mind set, he went to Flaus's carriage to report his decision.

Flaus seemed to sense Baal's approach. "So, our foe has fled into Schnee Fortress," he said. "All has transpired as you foresaw."

"Indeed it has. In the end, this vaunted scion of the War God is as fallible as any other man."

"We can only hope that you are right. So? When should I show myself? I imagine my absence is beginning to affect morale."

The prince was right. Between Baal's refusal to fight despite vastly superior numbers and the disruptive effects of the enemy's feigned night raids, the soldiers' spirits were beginning to flag.

"Morale will recover naturally, in time. Fear not, Your Highness. The moment to reveal yourself will come soon enough."

After annihilating the attempted night raid and chasing the main force back into Schnee Fortress, the enemy would be Baal's to dispatch. When the time came, he would pit Flaus against their most fearsome fighter: the man in black. That would be the test. If his experiment proved a failure, he would abandon Lebering and return to his homeland. If the prince was fortunate enough to survive, he would continue his plans, and his compatriots would have no choice but to lend more credence to his ideas.

"The zlostas will rule Soleil once more." Baal's voice was low and tinged with amusement. "That much I promise."

Flaus chuckled. “Indeed. We shall build a nation grand enough to rival the Grantzian Empire!”

Laughing silently at the prince behind closed lips, Baal left the carriage behind. With the cold wind blowing over him, he stopped and cast a glance back over his shoulder.

The zlostas will rule Soleil once more—but you shall have no place among us.

Lebering was the land of the zlostas in name alone. Pureblood zlostas existed there no longer. The blood of some ran thicker than others’, but all were tainted by intermingling with other peoples.

There are no mongrels among the zlostas. You will be our slaves, just as the humans once were.

Humans had ruled Soleil for a thousand years, yet that weakest of races had only their own numbers to show for their prolonged infestation. They had accomplished nothing of worth. They were a poison to this world, and their age was one of darkness.

Yes...a dark age. That’s what they’ve built.

The corners of Baal’s mouth twisted with distaste as he resumed walking.

*

Schnee Fortress was one of several forts that had been constructed in times long past to expand Lebering’s power in the south. When the region had finally fallen, however, it had ceased to serve a useful purpose. Nowadays, it was nothing more than a shell of its former self.

Moving around soldiers hurrying past in all directions, Hiro made his way to the war room that had been set up in the center of the complex.

This is a fortress in name only. It won’t last a day.

Schnee Fortress had only seen one recorded battle, when a disaffected local noble had raised an army against the king of the time. That had been two hundred years ago. Ever since, it had been left to molder, its visibly rotten structures periodically repaired but otherwise left unprepared for an external assault.

Hiro entered the war room and took stock of the faces within. They immediately rose and bowed. He bowed back, gestured for them to take their seats, and took his own place at the head of the table.

“You may begin,” he commanded.

A nervous-looking officer stood up, holding a sheaf of documents. “As we expected, the rebels have surrounded the fortress. Furthermore, Princess Claudia has sent word from behind their lines. She is in position to commence her attack and awaits our signal.”

Of their three thousand troops, Hiro had sent one thousand behind the enemy in order to facilitate an all-out attack on their central camp. No army could survive without its chain of command, even one of this size; cut off the head and the rest would scatter. He had also stolen around three hundred rebel uniforms during the rout of their first cohort, which he would use as disguises to trick them into falling on each other. He had left nothing to chance. Everything was going according to plan.

With a satisfied nod, he instructed one of the officers to lay a map on the table. Pawns went down to indicate the positions of Claudia’s detachment, the rebel command, and the second prince’s forces.

“She also writes that the Fifth Legion shows no sign of moving,” the officer continued. “It seems they are waiting to see how the battle unfolds. Oh, and it appears that Lord Muninn has joined her, none the worse for wear.”

“Good. It sounds like everything is in order.” Hiro smiled, then stood up as the officer took his seat. “We will proceed as planned, then. In half an hour’s time, we will give her the signal.”



“Her Highness also writes that the enemy appears to have made preparations for a night raid and she doubts the effectiveness of an attack. Would it not be better to first send spies into their midst?”

“No need. We have plenty there already. Besides, it doesn’t matter whether the enemy sees the night raid coming or not. It *will* work.”

With a fearless smile, Hiro toppled the enemy commander. A *clack* echoed through the room—a small sound, yet loud in the silence.

*

Heavy clouds shrouded the night sky, obscuring the light of the stars and blanketing the world in darkness. The eye could not have picked out a rock on the ground unaided. In the rebel camp, however, there was no such concern; to the army’s rear, a sea of bonfires illuminated the night. Ranks of soldiers stood near the pyres, their eyes glinting eerily in the firelight as they scanned the darkness in anticipation of an enemy assault.

“Not long now, I’d wager,” Baal murmured as he gazed over the scene from his watchtower.

“What makes you think they’ll come at all?” asked Flaus, beside him. “I’ll wager our defenses will scare them off.”

“You fret too much, Your Highness. They will come. See for yourself.”

Baal raised a finger. Flaus’s piercing blue eyes squinted in the direction he indicated. Below, a group of soldiers were conversing merrily.

“To look at them, one would not think we were at war at all,” Flaus said with audible disapproval. “And they are not the only ones. Our army’s vigilance appears to be lacking.”

Baal only smiled. “Such is the enemy’s plan: feigning raid after raid in order to exhaust our men, make them incautious, and lull them into complacency. And tonight, they mean to reap their harvest.”

Night after night, the enemy had threatened an attack, keeping the men awake and on edge, but had never followed through. In time, they had convinced Baal’s soldiers that a raid was never coming. They had also laid other

traps—too minor to be worthy of notice, but Baal counted at least eight—which, in sum, had certainly succeeded in lowering rebel morale. Next and last would be their final ploy, and it would start with yet another feigned night raid.

“First, they will make a great deal of noise to our fore,” Baal predicted.

“Oh?” Flaus’s eyebrows rose. “Whatever do you mean?”

At that moment, the thunder of horseshoes sounded from the direction of the fortress. Panicked cries of “We’re under attack!” rose from below. Baal, however, did not seem rushed. His mouth curled quietly into a smirk as he directed his prearranged messengers to their respective destinations.

“It is only a bluff, my lord. An all-too-obvious ruse that we need not entertain.”

“So this racket is meaningless?”

“Well, not entirely. It does play a part in the enemy’s designs.”

The noise would double as a signal for their next move: a false attack on the rebel army’s rear. The feigned charge would most likely comprise captured criminals—those who, sooner or later, would be put to death under the laws of Lebering.

“We have lost contact with several of our reconnaissance patrols,” Baal explained. “I expect they have been captured.”

In light of their crimes, the men could expect no sympathy. The enemy would not hesitate to use them as bait.

“Riders to our rear!” a cry went up.

“And there you have it,” Baal said.

“Impressive. You truly have read their every move.”

In the light of the bonfires, picking the enemy out from the darkness was a simple matter.

“Loose arrows!” Baal commanded. “Don’t be deceived by their tricks! Use your wits, shoot straight, and we shall easily prevail!”

Bows twanged. Arrow after arrow struck home. A few horses escaped the rain

of projectiles only to crash fruitlessly into the anti-cavalry palisades. As soon as the fighting was over, Baal sent out a unit to investigate the identity of the riders. While waiting for their return, he and Flaus descended from the watchtower.

“Next, they will attack in force from the front,” he said.

“So their feint is in truth a double feint? Their true attack was always from the fore?”

Baal’s grin grew even more conceited. “Indeed. They will come in waves. It would be truly foolish to attack from the rear, where our defenses are strongest. Even a rank amateur would not make such a mistake.”

“So in the end, their strategy was one that even a child could understand. Why all this subterfuge, then?”

“I imagine they hoped to split our forces. But when one can read them as easily as I can, it is a trifling matter to counteract their schemes.”

As the pair mounted their horses, a messenger approached.

“We have inspected the men who attacked the rear, my lord,” the man announced. “We found their limbs bound and their shoulders marked with prisoners’ brands. It seems they were fixed to their horses.”

Baal snorted. “Predictable to the last. Now, blow the horns, just as I told you! We will meet the enemy to the fore and crush them!”

The messenger departed. A short while later, horn blasts took up from all directions. At the same time, the battle cries from the front began to swell, suggesting that the fight had begun in earnest. Satisfied that the enemy’s focus was indeed there, Baal gave his final order.

“Put them all to the sword. Cut the head of every last human from his body —”

He did not finish his command. Blooming light cast the visible portions of his face into sharp relief as several tongues of flame erupted across the camp. Frantic cries of “To arms! To arms!” went up from all around.

An advisor rode up, wide-eyed and frantic. “My lord! The rams are burning!”

Baal raised his voice to calm the panicking soldiers. "Do not falter! This is but another ploy to split our forces! We have no need for siege weaponry! Leave the fires to burn and hasten to the front! Focus their attention there!"

The enemy had laid their plans well. They were pulling out every trick in the book to confound Baal's men and keep them separated. Their agents had likely slipped in during the chaos of their first feigned night raid and lain low in the camp ever since. Impressive work, all told. Still, they had only prolonged the inevitable. This battle had been decided from the first, and it lay within Baal's grasp.

"If only they had been content to play their tricks from behind the safety of their walls, they might have lived a little longer." He scowled in exasperation at his enemy's incompetence.

Flaus's expression soured. "Then I shall have no part to play after all. How long must I wait to test my newfound powers?"

"Many battles yet lie ahead of us, Your Highness." Baal shrugged. "You will not want for chances, of that I assure you."

He spurred his horse into a trot. By the time he joined the back of the front line, the fighting had turned bloody. The foe had shifted their efforts to the center in a desperate attempt to break through, but the night raid defenses were standing strong, and the rebels vastly outnumbered their enemies; the soldiers were having little difficulty pushing back. Orders passed quickly along the chain of command, and all units moved in cohesion to maintain the advantage as they charged into the fray. The southern army was falling back. It would not be long before they broke and fled to Schnee Fortress.

"I had hoped to play out my plans to perfection," Baal said to himself, "but this will suffice. I will crush them here and now, and be done with them."

Soon the enemy lines would collapse, and the task of mopping up the fleeing soldiers would be all that would remain.

"Send word to every last man," he instructed the advisors waiting at his side. "Annihilate the foe!"

Drums rumbled and horns sounded, carrying the order throughout the army.

At Baal's side, Flaus gazed with satisfaction at the battlefield, from which the stench of death was already rising. "And so it ends," he observed. "This scion of Mars was of little note after all."

"Humans are short-lived creatures, Your Highness. I expect his ancestor's blood must have been thinned to nothing."

"Well, who he was in life hardly matters. His death will serve equally well to announce the return of the zlostá."

"Quite so—"

No sooner had Baal opened his mouth than his body pitched forward. Caught off guard, he crashed to the ground. As he staggered to his feet, disoriented, screams erupted from all sides.

"What is the meaning of this?!" he roared.

A wave of dizziness came over him and he sank to one knee. Only then did he notice the arrowhead protruding from his stomach.

"Where did this...?"

Blood trickled down the shaft, dripping from the metal tip to seep into the earth. Baal's face twisted, in confusion more than in pain.

Flaus dashed up, his mouth agape. "Lord van Bittenia!" he cried. "Are you all right?!"

"A scratch, Your Highness, nothing more. We must determine what is happening — No, never mind. I see there is no need."

Flaus looked around to see the ground littered with soldiers, all with arrows protruding from their bodies. Some were not moving.

Baal gritted his teeth and got to his feet before reaching behind his back and yanking the arrow out. Slowly, he turned around. Laughter burst from his chest at the sight that awaited him. "I see! The attack was from the rear all along!"

A wall of cavalry bore down on them like an avalanche, its tumultuous force far too great for the depleted rear guard to halt. The charge earlier, while false, had nonetheless succeeded in breaking much of the palisade. Now, the enemy surged through those gaps and into the camp. The bonfires fell into their hands

and tents began to burn. Fleeing soldiers died beneath a rain of crushing hooves.

“So they chose foolishness over wisdom. The gall of it...”

“Lord Baal! They’re not just coming from the rear— Urgh!”

A messenger dashed toward Baal, his face drawn, but a rider’s lance took him in the back before he could finish. His body bounced across the ground and vanished from sight. Screams and roars rose from both sides, accompanied by the harsh timbre of a steel symphony.

“They thought well to sweep in from the sides. The dark will conceal their numbers. Even a small host will be able to cause chaos.”

Now that the fortress was surrounded, the rebel soldiers would be feverishly focused on the fore. An attack from another angle would naturally catch them unawares. Baal watched as though in a dream as the battle turned to slaughter. All the while, the enemy riders bore down on him.

“Hmph. You underestimate me.”

He raised Failnaught and launched three arrows in quick succession. Each found its mark in a soldier’s throat. As the men fell, Baal turned to grasp a stunned Flaus by the shoulder.

“The time to reveal yourself has come sooner than expected,” he said.

“Reveal myself? Now?!”

“You may not turn the tide of battle, but you will secure our retreat.” Baal shot arrows into the press even as he spoke, steadily picking off foes. “We must fall back. Overcommitting here will impede our future plans.”

If they regrouped now, they could still salvage perhaps ten thousand men.

“In any case,” Baal continued, “the enemy’s success does not mean they will survive the night unscathed. They will lose many men in this battle. We will have ample opportunity to settle the score.”

The Asura’s detached tone sent Flaus into a red-faced rage. “You snake! You promised me victory!”

“Calm yourself, Your Highness. First we must quit this field.”

Flaus wheeled around to vent his spleen by striking down an enemy soldier. Then, although the words seemed to stick in his craw, he roared for all to hear, “Retreat! Retreat!”

“That’s the way,” Baal said.

Remaining here would do nothing to check the enemy’s momentum now. This defeat stung, but his overall plan was still proceeding apace.

“I am far from out of schemes. We may have lost this battle, but the war will be ours yet.”

To never know defeat was a useless ideal. Some engagements might go against him, some of his plans might be seen through by the enemy, but the only battle that truly mattered was the last. As long as he won that, history would call him the victor.

“We must return to the royal city and regroup,” he declared, turning his horse about to flee the battlefield.

At that moment, an eerie noise rang through the air—a quiet sound, oh so quiet, too low to ordinarily be audible above the battlefield clamor. Its touch lingered unpleasantly on the eardrums.

“Countless fields of carnage have I crossed. Countless fallen corpses have I trodden underfoot. Countless frail hopes have I cast aside.”

A figure approached almost soundlessly, like the looming maw of purest darkness.

“How dare you speak of wisdom when you have never known despair.”

The voice bore no inflection, but it carried a deep and terrible weight. Baal and Flaus instinctively raised their weapons as they spun around to face it. There stood a boy with an eyepatch covering half of his face. Lifeless bodies lay strewn around him.

“If you think I’ll let you run, think again. You are prey for me to devour and grow stronger from. I won’t risk you coming back to haunt me.” The boy’s kind features hardened as he raised his gleaming sword. “Now, let me show you

what despair truly is.”

The darkness billowing around him took on a deeper shade, and the air itself began to warp as it flooded with cold rage.

*

“You will teach us of despair? Words taken straight from your ancestor’s mouth. You are just as arrogant as he was, and just as grating for it.” Baal’s lips twisted with ire, then gradually curled in joy. “Still, I will admit, your scheme was impressive. I shall take it for my own. It will serve me well in the battles to come.”

The Asura’s smug tone was an unmistakable taunt, but Hiro only snorted. “Then take some advice too,” he said, laying Excalibur’s blade across his shoulders as he turned his empty gaze on Baal. “There is no ingenuity in wisdom or practicality in convention, but both can be found in plans you might dismiss as foolish.”

Commanders cared only for wise plans and disregarded foolish ones. Precisely for that reason, the latter could present unique opportunities. It was a simple thing, in the end. To confound one’s opponent in order to open them up for a lethal blow was a time-honored path to victory.

“How comfortable you must have felt, watching everything unfold as you predicted. So comfortable, you missed all the signs of your defeat.”

“Do you mean to say that I was playing into your hands all along?”

“Not mine. Not this time. I was just another pawn in this game.” With a shake of his head, Hiro lifted his sword and leveled it at Baal. “But enough talk. I think it’s time to finish this.”

He raised his blade and drew a breath. There was a beat of silence—and then he vanished.

All at once, there was an arrow in Baal’s hand. The Asura unleashed a volley, quick and wild. Sparks scattered with every shot, filling the air with the ringing of metal.

“Oh?” Hiro’s eyebrows rose. “You can see me?”

“I can sense you.”

Baal punctuated his answer with another arrow. The sparks between the two combatants grew closer and closer, until—

“Forgotten me, have you?!”

Flaus sprang forward to stand in Hiro’s way. Metal rang as blade clashed with blade. Excalibur skittered away.

Hiro looked down at his numbing fingers, then back up at Flaus. “You weren’t that strong last time,” he said. “You’ve fallen, haven’t you?”

If the fact had not been obvious from the prince’s regenerated arm, it would have been clear from his uncanny might. His zlosta blood could account for neither.

Flaus grinned widely. “Please. I am no mere fiend. This is the power of the Origin, the power of our lord. That which lies beyond the reach of you feeble humans—the birthright of the zlosta!”

“I see.”

“I hear much of your strength in battle, but you will never surpass us. It is not in your blood.”

Flaus was babbling something or other, buoyed up by his own newfound power, but Hiro wasn’t listening. He was gazing up at the sky, his eyes fixed on something far away.

“I would stop talking if I were you. Say your lord’s name and I won’t be able to hold back.”

With a tilt of his head, he cracked his knuckles. The abyss swirled in the depths of his eyes as they held Flaus in their gaze. Excalibur’s brilliance guttered mournfully, while the Black Camellia swelled on a battle wind. White and black light did battle around him, devouring one another to create an unearthly sight.

At last, Flaus noticed the change that had come over his enemy. “Who are you?”

“Even now, when I think back to those days, my chest feels like it could burst with anger. I was pathetic, squeamish, far too naive. A hopeless fool.”

Hiro spoke to nobody but himself. His words were a reprimand for his ears alone.

“Naivety must be shed. Snuffed out before it can cause tragedy.”

Space began to distort around him. Spirit weapons emerged from rents in the air.

“War is a world of absolutes. Kill or be killed. Strength or weakness. Victory or defeat. Black or white.”

And so, the king declares from atop his lonely pinnacle...

“As such, I choose to never know defeat. Until I build the world she wished for.”

Such was the duty left to him. The crowning glory that he had fallen short of one thousand years ago. Flaus shrank back in the face of Hiro’s overwhelming might.

“There is nothing to fear. You will only return to dust.”

As Hiro stepped forward, there was a violent noise like reality itself tearing—and thence came Liegegrazalt. With a surge of vast power, blinding speed turned to explosive force, gouging a furrow into the earth. A torrent of light turned darkness to day. The spirit weapons hanging in the night sky fell like shooting stars, bathing the world in brilliance. The eye could not hope to follow. Unleashed at the speed of light, his unstoppable swordsmanship carried immense destructive force.

“Gah!”

Only when pain blasted through his thorax and his spine snapped back like a bow did Flaus register that a blade had run him through from behind. Before the realization even hatched in his brain, the next sword struck home, rending flesh and splitting bone as it sank deep into his bowels. Hiro’s blinding speed admitted neither defense nor reprieve. This was the power of the Heavenly Sovereign’s Graal, Godspeed—or Lucifer.

Yet Flaus, too, was no mere mortal. Even as innumerable slashes scored his flesh, he struck back relentlessly against his assailant. His body overflowed with

a vitality that would have astounded an ordinary man, and his regenerative powers surpassed even those of a fiend. His strength was no less extraordinary; the slightest graze of his wild swings could crack a skull like an egg.

Even so, Hiro evaded all of his attacks with ease.

“Monster! Are you truly human?!” Flaus’s eyes widened. His voice took on a note of surprise. “Curse you... Gah!”

As living beings cannot defy the natural order, so Flaus was helpless before Hiro’s easy mastery. His arm flew from his shoulder, less severed by a blade and more torn free by a bullet.

“This cannot be!” he roared. “I am zlost! Our lord’s chosen!”

“And you’re slowing down. Time to finish thi— Ngh?!”

A volley of arrows arced toward Hiro as he landed. A short distance away, Baal lowered his bow.

“I can sense you plain as day, boy! I’ll see you dead yet!”

Alas, he was only chasing his foe’s shadow.

“You can keep out of this. Get down and stay down.”

Hiro appeared in front of Baal and rammed a spirit weapon through his flesh. A second followed, a third, a fifth. The Asura didn’t even have a chance to cry out. Hiro ran his limbs through and kicked him to the ground before at last turning his attention back to Flaus.

“The crown must be mine!” the prince croaked. “I will not fall here! I cannot!”

His own hot blood melted the snow into slush. He thrashed weakly in the middle of a crimson mire, struggling to rise despite his injuries.

Hiro approached softly. He patted the breast of his overcoat and smiled. “Your determination has impressed the Black Camellia. She says she wants to eat you.”

Flaus blanched. “What?”

“Don’t be afraid. You’d be surprised how comforting the dark can be.”

The flood of light was fast fading. Darkness consumed it down to its faintest

traces. Flaus's face contorted in despair. A scream tore from his throat.

"Feast," Hiro commanded, and color fled the world.

The abyss crushed all light in its jaws. All hue and shade vanished into its wicked maw, yet still it was not sated—not until it sank its teeth into the shrieking Flaus.

In an instant, it was done, and Hiro stood alone on a blood-soaked snowfield.

"Phew..."

As he let out a sigh, he opened his ears to the world around him. The clashing of steel gradually soothed the pounding in his chest. Cold rationality reasserted itself over burning anger. As he swept his gaze across the battlefield, he spied Baal crawling away on his belly. At a leisurely pace, he moved to block the Asura's path.

"I have a question for you," he said. "How did you grant Flaus that power?"

"As if I would tell you, of all men," Baal growled. With a smirk, he tore away his hood.

The breath caught in Hiro's throat at the sight. Baal's face was horrifically scarred, as though he had been tortured. His eyes had been gouged out, leaving two yawning pits, and a hole in his forehead marked where a manastone had been cut free from his skull. Most shocking of all, however, was that his face was familiar. Once, he had been one of the zlostas ancestors—the old kings of the zlostas whom Hiro had slain.

"Surprised, boy? I lost my eyes to the War God long ago. It took a long while to learn to survive without them, believe you me. Yet even stripped of my mana, even cast down into the muck, I clung to life. And I dreamed of the day when vengeance would be mine."

Hiro could tell that he spoke the truth: his mana was barely a shadow of its former glory. His body, too, was emaciated and dreadfully frail.

"One thousand years ago, the War God took my land from me. And now my ambitions are thwarted once more by his descendant's hand." Despite the spirit weapons skewering Baal's limbs, he shakily rose, the fiendbow Failnaught tight

in his grip. “Come, then! Let us finish this! My thousand years of hatred will go unspoken no longer!”

He loosed an arrow with astounding speed, but in spite of his proximity, Hiro batted it aside with one hand.

“You’re living for nothing more than a past grudge. Pathetic.” He grasped the still-struggling Baal by the chest and pulled him close. “But if that is part of my legacy, then I will accept it.”

Excalibur ran Baal through as he fell forward. The Asura cried out in pain, but his fingers sank deeper into Hiro’s shoulder even as blood burst from his mouth.

“Do not...believe...that this is over! My schemes...have only just begun!”

“Then I will devour them all and grow stronger still.”

Hiro thrust Baal away. A silver streak scored the air as he twisted, bringing Excalibur across in a horizontal slash.

“Death will not stop m—”

Baal’s head flew, trailing a ribbon of blood. It landed in the heart of the bloody quagmire and sank out of sight.

“It’s over, I see,” a soft voice said.

Hiro turned to see Claudia standing nearby. She walked closer and picked up the dropped Failnaught.

“Now all three Relics have returned to the crown.”

She plucked out the fiendbow’s manastone and slipped it into one of the divots on Hauteclaire’s hilt. With three manastones and Lox’s Delligr, the fiendblade was finally complete. She gazed at it for a moment, enraptured, before her eyes slid to Hiro.

“On behalf of the royal family of Lebering, I thank you. This would not have been possible without you.”

Hiro shrugged, but otherwise said nothing.

“Now,” Claudia said, “let us end this senseless war.”

She raised Hauteclaire high, then drove it down into the ground. Mana surged

into the earth. Fissures spread out around her like spiderwebs.

“The traitors who slew His Majesty are dead!” she declared.

Her cool voice cut clear and true through the night. Snowflakes danced around her on the wind, lending her an ethereal air, and the flames of the burning encampment cast her beauty in flickering amber. The battle ceased as all turned to look at her.

“Sheathe your swords! There is nothing to be gained from further bloodshed!”

She withdrew Hauteclaire from the ground and leveled it at a group of soldiers who were still fighting. The gesture brought them to a standstill. For a moment, there was silence, and then shocked whispers rose from all around. The men were quite literally frozen solid. They adorned the snowfields like ice sculptures, reflected firelight dancing on their translucent skin.

“If you would continue this battle, then it is me you must face!”

Dawn broke, illuminating Claudia with searing light. The soldiers cast aside their arms and fell to their knees. In some time long past, the rulers of this land had possessed an unassailable dignity. Now, that quality was born again in her.



Hiro watched her thoughtfully for a while, squinting against the light, then he turned and walked away.

“Your Lordship!”

“Chief!”

Huginn and Muninn raced up through the burning camp.

Hiro spread his arms wide in welcome, overjoyed to see them safe. “I’m glad you’re all right. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Not a chance!” Huginn exclaimed. “Her Ladyship saw to that! What about you?”

“Aye,” Muninn followed. “We might not look it, but we know when to make ourselves scarce.”

“You did well, Muninn,” Hiro said. “It’s thanks to you that they came after us at all.”

If not for Muninn’s actions, Baal might have been too wary of the Fifth Legion to pursue Hiro’s forces.

“Think nothin’ of it, chief. All I did was drop one measly scroll and scarper.”

Huginn shot her brother a jealous glare as he rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment.

“You did well too, Huginn,” Hiro said. “It was dangerous work I gave you, but you pulled it off.”

Huginn had been one of the spies whom Hiro had sent to infiltrate the enemy camp and coordinate with Claudia’s assault. She had played the vital role of torching the siege weapons, as well as raising cries of alarm to incite the enemy to turn on each other.

“We would have lost this battle if not for the two of you.”

He would have to find some way to reward them once they returned to the capital. Garda would be delighted.

There was a moment of silence. The siblings seemed dumbfounded to see him smiling so kindly.

“We should get going,” he said. “We have no more business here.”

“At once!” they chorused.

Hiro smiled a little bashfully, relieved to see the tension broken, and looked up at the sky.

I don't know what kind of queen Claudia will make, but one thing is certain: Lebering has entered a new era.

Cloudless blue stretched away above him, so clear that the previous days' blizzard seemed like a distant dream.

I only hope she builds a nation you would be proud of, Lox.

As his old comrades passed through his mind, his lips pulled into a quiet smile.

Epilogue

The twenty-eighth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1023

In the central courtyard of Schnee Fortress, Hiro and his comrades were making preparations for their return to imperial lands. Huginn and Muninn loaded water and provisions into a cart. Hiro took a seat nearby, watching them work out of the corner of his eye as he gazed up at the sky. He turned his head at the approaching crunch of footsteps on snow. There stood Claudia, holding her hair down as the wind plucked at her tresses.

“Will you not consider a slower return?” she asked.

“I’m afraid I have to be going,” he replied. “A lot of things need my attention.”

“Then I will not force you to stay. I wish you safe travels.”

“You know, I heard from one of the men that the royal city’s been retaken.”

This had happened on the previous day, if the soldier’s words were anything to go by. A faction loyal to Claudia had freed the imprisoned nobles and expelled the rebel army from the town. Between that and her now-complete fiendblade, her claim to the throne was unshakable.

“Indeed. I intend to stage a triumphant return once the destruction of the battle is cleared away.”

“Well, speaking as the scion of Mars, let me say that I hope Lebering prospers.”

“Oh, there shall be no question of that. In time, I shall see it grow to rival the Grantzian Empire.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Hiro shot her a cheerful smile. “So? Are you happy? Now that everything’s gone exactly the way you planned?”

He asked the question nonchalantly, but his words were sharpened to a point. A smile spread across Claudia’s face, a little surprised and more than a little intrigued.

“Oh? When exactly did you see through me?”

“Right from the start. From the moment we met, I thought there was something off about you. Still, it was only when Flaus killed the king that I knew for certain.”

Despite being capable of slaughtering a gang of bandits by herself, Claudia hadn't raised a finger against Flaus, even though the prince could barely hold a sword. She had only clung to the king's body and wailed. Anybody would mourn the death of their father, but normally after grief came anger. Instead, she had done nothing but sit in shock, waiting for Hiro to save her.

“And that wasn't all. You aren't as good an actress as you think you are. When I saw how you smirked at Haniel's body, I almost saw red.”

“Dear me, and I was so certain I'd hidden that. Was it truly that obvious?”

“My eyes aren't easy to fool.”

“Ah, of course. Uranos. I will admit, that did slip my mind.”

“Was the throne really worth losing so many loyal retainers?”

“Neither my father nor my brother were fit to be king. Something had to be done. Besides, one who truly cares for their people, who values their soldiers, who loves their nation, would not flinch at the prospect of sacrifice. And as the architect of all this tragedy, it would hardly be right for me to emerge unscathed.”

She had not hesitated to turn against her own family for the sake of her nation. She was a cold and fearsome woman, Hiro thought.

“What would you have done if I had never been appointed special envoy?”

“I would have turned to the Fifth Legion. Instead of you, I would have used the second prince.”

“The second prince isn't an easy man to use. Lebering would have fallen.”

“Then so be it. If I could not find a way, then I was never fit to be queen.”

Hiro sighed. She was audacious, he had to give her that, and she had steel in her spine.

“And you planned all this yourself?”

“But of course. First, I told my brother that Father meant to name me heir. He always was a jealous one. He did exactly what I knew he would—plot a rebellion and slay the king.”

The rest was simple, she said. A self-assured smile spread across her face as she raised her arms wide.

“Garius was never fond of Father and his conservative ways. It was clear that he would side with my brother. As would Baal—he was my brother’s tutor, you see, and he had been whispering poison into his ear for many years. Poor old Haniel was nothing if not loyal, and I knew that he would never forgive a traitor. So long as I steered my brother true, I knew that the rest would fall into place.”

“Flaus might have been jealous,” Hiro said, “but he wasn’t stupid enough to start a rebellion over something like that. He must have had some other reason.” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “Like, say...learning that you were an auf.”

Claudia’s confident smile instantly froze over. “You know of my kind?”

“They’re an old legend. Over a thousand years old, in fact. Once upon a time, there were oddities born among the zlosta. Their skin was white as snow, they had vast reservoirs of mana, and they were born to strange powers that zlosta could not usually possess. The rest of the zlosta shunned them, calling them aufs, or changelings.”

As the aufs’ numbers grew, so did the persecution they suffered from the rest of the zlosta. Eventually, they fled to the safety of the continent to the west, where they took on a new name: álfar. Over successive generations, their mana waned, until at last they were no more—one more footnote in the pages of history.

She must be a throwback, Hiro thought. That’s why King Svarov was so hesitant to give the throne to Flaus. And she used that to stoke his envy into murder.

Claudia giggled. “You should have seen my brother’s face when he first learned what I was. It was truly fearsome. I believe it was at that very moment

that he embraced zlosta supremacy.” She cocked her head, her smile amused. “And that same knowledge convinced *you* that I would be worth using. Am I wrong?”

“What gives you that idea?”

“I am the descendant of one of Mars’s closest comrades, beloved by my people, and a fine fit for the throne—*and* I am an auf. I would make an ideal pawn, if the situation called for it. Surely that did not escape your notice.”

That, he could not deny. The moment Hiro had laid eyes on Svarov van Lebering, he had made up his mind to have Claudia replace her father. Even had the coup not occurred and the king remained alive, he would have found some other way to depose him.

“Perhaps, but there wasn’t any need for this much bloodshed. That’s the difference between the two of us. I wouldn’t have sacrificed innocent people to seat you on the throne.”

“Our methods may differ, but they amount to the same thing in the end. Father is gone, and I am queen.” Claudia laid a delicate hand on the hilt of Hauteclair. “And as queen, I must warn you that while you truly do have my gratitude, I have no intention of being your puppet.”

“I don’t need you to be. All I want is for you not to stain your forefather’s legacy.”

“Oh? And I was so certain you would come at me with force. Are you saying that you mean to leave me be?”

“Whatever it is you’re after in the long run, right now, our interests align. As long as you stay out of my way, I don’t care what you do.” Hiro laid his own hand quietly on the hilt of Excalibur as he fixed Claudia with a penetrating gaze. “And if our goals do end up bringing us into conflict, I will crush your hopes then.”

“I eagerly await the day that you try. Although I suspect that you will come around to my side before the end.”

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

“Lord Hiro, do you love the Grantzian Empire as it is now?”

Hiro gave no reply to that.

Claudia reached out to lay a hand against his cheek. “But how could you? Knowing what became of the children of the Black Hand after Mars’s death—why, it must break your heart.”

As she said, the tale of the Black Hand had not ended happily. Fearing the popularity of Mars’s five generals, the third emperor had arrested them all—with the exception of Lox—on trumped-up charges and put their entire bloodlines to the sword. The rest of Hiro’s Crow Legion, feared for their prowess in battle, had not escaped either. According to the history books, they had plotted rebellion only to be exposed and purged.

“The fifth emperor’s apology may have restored their honor,” Claudia continued, “but it does not undo the cruelty of their deaths.” Her eyes seemed to challenge him as she covered her mouth with a sorrowful hand. “Do you not wish to avenge the stain on *their* legacy?”

“What would it matter if I did? Our goals might intersect for the moment, but they will never be the same.”

“Nations are not built on kindness, Lord Hiro.”

“Maybe not, but even so, I will walk my own path. No one else’s.” Hiro gently brushed Claudia’s hand aside. “May we meet again. If fortune favors it.”

Claudia gave a tinkling laugh. “Someday, you will realize where your allegiance truly lies. And when that day comes, you will indeed see me again.”

With that, they went their separate ways.

Hiro stopped in front of Huginn and Muninn. “Are we ready to leave?”

“Yes, Your Lordship!” Huginn chirped. “Whenever you like!”

At that moment, the gates to Schnee Fortress shuddered open. The trio turned around as one toward the noise. A lone rider passed through and came barreling toward them—a man they knew.

“Your Highness!” Drix cried. “You must return to the capital at once!” He leaped down from the saddle and stumbled into a bow in front of Hiro.

“Brigadier General von Bunadala is trapped behind enemy lines in Faerzen! Lady Celia Estrella rode to her aid but was caught in an ambush from Draal!”

Why was Aura behind enemy lines? What was Third Prince Brutahl playing at? Why were there Draali forces in Faerzen? Questions flooded in Hiro’s mind, but one rose above them all. He tried his best to quiet his pounding heart as he spoke.

“Are they all right?”

“We don’t know, Your Highness. We’ve heard nothing!”

Hiro’s hands balled tight into fists. He breathed out, long and slow, and closed his eyes.

“Send our fastest horse to Garda. Have him bring the Crow Legion to the capital. From there, we will march into Faerzen—” He stopped and shook his head. There was a better way. “No. We will march into the Grand Duchy of Draal.”

Three sets of eyes widened in confusion at his words.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles* Vol. 3. To those following from the previous volume, I hope you've been well these past three months (hey, that's not so long!). To those who decided to jump in from here, welcome. It's a pleasure to meet you.

I have so much to talk about...but I'm already out of space! Sorry! With that being the case, I'd like to get right into the acknowledgments.

Firstly, to Miyuki Ruria-sama: thank you for yet another volume full of beautiful artwork and for bringing my characters to life in gorgeous detail. Your tender illustrations are a balm to my soul. To my editor, S-sama: I can never thank you enough for putting up with all the inconvenience I caused you with this volume. May you continue to be my guiding voice. To everybody in the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everybody else involved with making this book a reality: thank you, thank you, thank you. And last but not least, my most heartfelt thanks to all of the readers who have stayed since the previous volume.

I'll keep the chuuni rays at full blast over here, so I hope you'll stick around.
May we meet again.

奉 (Tatematsuri)



**The
Mythical
Hero's
Otherworld
Chronicles**

3

Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria



Claudia

Hiro Oguro

The girl giggled into the back of her hand. "Because I snuck out of the castle, of course."



Liz

“I want
some
too!”

“I’m
getting
it, I’m
getting
it!”

Huginn

Bonus Short Stories

A Dance with the Amethyst Princess

“Thank you for coming.”

Claudia cut a striking figure in her white dress. Around her, soaring melodies, stately tempos, and peaceful chatter held gentle sway over the great hall.

“Not at all.” Hiro nodded in acknowledgment. “I should thank you for inviting me.”

She shot him a smile. “The fourth prince of the empire ought not to be so reserved.”

The subtext was clear—*your status far outstrips mine*—but as far as Hiro was concerned, his position had no meaning outside of the empire.

“This is Lebering, Your Highness,” he said. “You outrank me here.”

Her eyebrows pulled together in dissatisfaction. “And Lebering lies under the aegis of the Grantzian Empire. Our stations are as heaven and earth.” A shadow crept over her dainty features.

“If you say so. But let’s forget about all that for tonight.”

Hiro decided not to linger on the subject any further. Any attempt to raise her spirits seemed doomed to failure.

Something shifted in the crowd, and he looked around. In the middle of the hall, noblemen were taking their ladies’ hands and beginning to dance.

“Have you ever danced, Lord Hiro?” Claudia asked.

“I’m afraid I haven’t lived the kind of life where you learn how. I’d probably trip over my own feet.”

One thousand years ago, he had spent all of his time on the front lines, and even now, he had only been the fourth prince for a matter of weeks. He didn’t

have much experience attending banquets and balls.

“Why don’t you let me show you?”

Claudia held out a hand. Hiro hesitated for a moment, but relented. It would be more polite to entertain her.

“I’ll warn you, I wasn’t lying. I’ll be an awful partner.”

“That’s quite all right. It matters not whether you can follow the steps, only that you enjoy the dance.”

She led Hiro to the middle of the hall. As they took up position, the nobles around them fell back to afford them space. More began to gather at the fringes, eager to see their princess dance with the fourth prince.

“Never you mind their stares.”

Flashing a radiant smile, she pressed her body against his. Even that small motion drew a cheer from the crowd. Hiro felt himself wilt with embarrassment, but a noble of his station could not let it show. All he could do was trust Claudia’s judgment.

“Now, lay your hand on my waist.” Her voice was like honey in his ear.

Hiro did as he was asked, cupping his left hand around her hip. He took her left hand firmly in his right, bringing them even closer together.

“Let’s try moving. Just follow my lead.”

“I’ll try,” he said hesitantly.

With his jaw set tight, he did his best to match Claudia’s movements, and the pair began to dance. They matched their steps to the orchestra, a silent glide punctuated by bursts of sudden boldness.

“Anybody would think you had done this before.” Claudia giggled. Her gaze softened.

“Are you sure? I feel like I’m barely keeping up.”

“Quite certain. But then, is it really a surprise that the War God’s scion excels at whatever he sets his mind to?”

Their feet traced out brisk steps as their motions grew steadily wilder. Nobles

watched in awe from all sides as the tempo of their dance alternated between tranquil calm and passionate haste.

“Don’t you just wish that times like these could last forever?” Claudia’s whisper was breathy with the exertion of the dance, and all the more alluring for it.

“Do you know why we invented time?” Hiro asked.

She cocked her head in bemusement. “So we could work more efficiently, I suppose.”

“So we could feel it slip away. We count it by hours to remind ourselves not to waste it.” He gripped her waist a little tighter, pulling her closer. “Counting time connects us to the past. It helps us recall a particular day, a particular moment.”

Their lips drew close enough to touch. The endless abyss of Hiro’s eye stared into Claudia’s own.

“And it shapes the future. The past is the bridge between the present and what is yet to come.”

Applause fell around them. Claudia gazed back at Hiro, her cheeks flushed pink.

“Or that’s what I think, anyway. That’s why we value the time we have. Why we treasure these moments we share.” Hiro stepped away with a flamboyant bow. “Thank you for your time, Your Highness. It was a pleasure to spend it with you.”

“Not at all,” Claudia replied. “You have been delightful company.”

She pressed her hands to her cheeks and averted her gaze, trying and failing to hide her blush.

First Brush with Huginn

The end of the fighting in Lichtein marked a period of calm in Berg Fortress. It was another peaceful day, and Hiro was cooped up in the study. All of a sudden, the door burst open with a crash that would make a grown man wince. Splinters flew across the room as dust billowed from the door.

“Give me back the boss! And my oaf of a brother too!”

A woman stood in the doorway, holding a nocked bow.

“Sorry,” Hiro said, nonplussed, “but who are you?”

Her eyebrows arched in anger. “The name’s Huginn, lieutenant of the Liberation Army!”

“Huh,” Hiro said. He picked up a sheet of paper on his desk—a list of the Fourth Legion’s prisoners of war—and scanned it. “Are you sure? I don’t see you on here.”

“Aye, ’cause I’m not! My squad was away on other business when you captured the rest.”

Apparently, she had been tasked with scouting Azbakal, scoping out the duchy’s movements, when communications from “the boss”—by which Hiro supposed she meant Garda—had ceased. Sensing that something was wrong, she had cut her reconnaissance short and tried to reconvene with the main force, but it had been too late. The Liberation Army had been defeated and the ducal forces had surrendered.

“I’ve been trying to break everyone else out ever since, but you imperials keep a tight watch. You’re good, I’ll admit it!” She glared at Hiro for a second, gritting her teeth in chagrin, before a wave of surprise came over her face. “Argh! I’m not here to sing your praises! Just give me back the boss and my fool of a brother!”

Hiro could only marvel at her impressive array of expressions. Unfortunately, all he could offer her was a rueful smile. Garda had already agreed to act as his lieutenant, he explained, and most of the rebels who had made up the Liberation Army were now soldiers in his own employ.

Huginn cocked her head. “Eh? Employ? You mean you ain’t got ’em in chains?”

“They were experienced sellswords and I needed men. I took on anybody who volunteered.”

“Well, what about me, then?”

“What about you? You’re not my prisoner.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“Go back to being a sellsword, I guess. Or you can join the rest in my employ. It’s up to you.”

“Right! It’s a deal!”

“Not so fast. I know this was my idea, but you’ll have to show me you can fight—”

Before Hiro could finish his sentence, Huginn released her bowstring. Had she lost her mind?! He dodged the incoming arrow, summoned a spirit weapon and closed in on her.

“Wha—?!”

Huginn tried to put some distance between them, but wielding a ranged weapon in a small room, she had no chance of fending Hiro off. He easily slipped behind her, into her blind spot.

“It’s over—”

Just as Hiro was certain he had won, Huginn’s foot came whistling toward his head. The roundhouse kick caught him completely off guard, and he only just raised his arm in time to block the explosive impact.

“Sometimes a bow’s no use,” Huginn grinned, “so I learned to fight with my fists!”

She rounded on Hiro with a succession of bullet-like punches. Ducking deftly away from them, he could not help but be impressed. She was strong—strong enough to take on ordinary fighters by the score. Eventually, the barrage bought her enough of an opening to spring back and launch an arrow.

“Nicely done. You pass.” Hiro halted his pursuit, struck the arrow out of the air, and flashed her a smile.

Huginn’s jaw dropped. “Did you just...? With a bloody sword?!”

“Maybe I was a little economical with the truth earlier. Garda and Muninn did mention you, actually. They were worried about you. They said they wanted me

to take you on if I had the chance.”

He hadn’t agreed immediately. If he was going to take somebody into his employ, he had to make certain that they could handle themselves—doubly so if they were female.

“But you’ve more than proven yourself,” Hiro continued. “You can join the new recruits tomorrow. For now, go find Garda and Muninn and...”

He trailed off as he saw that she was staring at the ground. Her shoulders trembled oddly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Are you cold?”

At last, she raised her head. “*Who cuts a bloody arrow out of the air?!*” she cried, loosing a volley of shots at him.

“Now hold on just a—!”

“There! You did it again! Argh, just let me land *one!*”

That was a slightly unreasonable demand when she was shooting to kill. A single hit would drop him stone dead. To his dismay, she began to cry.

“Waaah! Let me hit you, you brute! I’ll draw blood before I’m through! You’ll see if I don’t!”

Their sparring match continued until the sun went down, its original purpose long forgotten.

Liz, Rosa, and the Ring

“It’s only right that I should take it. I’m older than you.”

“Then you shouldn’t be so selfish. Treat your little sister.”

Liz and Rosa glared at one another over the ring and the necklace laid out on a table. Hiro looked on from a chair by the wall.

“He already gave you that bracelet, did he not?”

“He did, but...that’s not the same thing!” Liz sounded defiant, but she nonetheless moved her arm guiltily behind her back.

Rosa snorted. “If you truly believed that, you wouldn’t be hiding it. You get a bracelet and I get a ring, is that not fair?”

“No, it’s not! The necklace is way more your thing!”

Rosa reached for the ring, but Liz smacked her hand away, snarling like a wildcat. Hiro, who had been watching their argument in silence, belatedly regretted not buying two rings.

“You settle this, Hiro,” Liz demanded. “Who should get it?”

“Agreed.” Rosa nodded. “You have to choose one of us.”

“Erm...you know, I really didn’t put all that much thought into this, so...” His gaze wandered off to the side.

Liz refused to take his mumbling for an answer. “Just hush and pick one of us already!” she said, leveling an impatient finger at him as she leaned forward to stare him in the eye.

“I guess what I’m saying is, I don’t really mind... Ha ha...”

Rosa sighed. “How can you be so decisive about policy, yet be unable to assert your way out of a paper bag when it comes to matters of the heart?”

Hiro could only say that he was out of his depth. Personal feelings had no place on the battlefield; there, he steeled his heart and did what had to be done. There was no room for doubt. This, however, was a different kind of contest entirely. Giving the ring to Liz would sour Rosa’s mood, which could easily come back to bite him, given how dependent he was on her support. Giving it to Rosa, meanwhile, would jeopardize his relationship with Liz and might even affect her performance on the battlefield. Even emperors had ruined themselves trying to navigate the female heart. Hiro would have to choose carefully, thoughtfully, and decisively, or he would suffer the same fate as his predecessors.

He rubbed his chin as he studied the pair. What to do? Liz’s eyes practically screamed “Pick me!”—she would certainly sulk if he turned her down, and that could cause all sorts of problems down the road. Rosa, meanwhile, was taking a seductive approach, crossing her arms to emphasize her ample bust. On the face of it, she looked calmer than her sister, but her smile very much did not

reach her eyes. Much like Liz, it sent shivers down Hiro's spine to think how she might take revenge if spurned.

With his decision made, he drew a deep breath.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you take turns?"

There was a beat of silence, and then both princesses expelled heavy sighs. Hiro couldn't blame them for being dissatisfied, but that was the goal—better to have both of them roll their eyes than pick one and have the other at his throat. He wasn't running away from the problem; this was a necessary step in his plan. That bore repeating: he was *not* running away.

The rest of the plan went like this: First, by stepping back from the argument, he would pit them against each other. Once they had settled things between themselves, he would step in to tie everything up with a bow. Then all three could put all this behind them and go to the banquet with no hard feelings.

"He's useless. Let's decide this ourselves." Liz boxed with empty space. Her fists made a whooshing noise as they tore through the air.

Rosa paled. "Sister dearest, you seem to be inviting me to my death."

It was hard to fault her trepidation. Rosa might have had some martial training, but Liz had a Spiritblade's blessing. Their battle wouldn't be much of a contest.

"Well, how would you settle it?"

"I say we let the Divines decide." Rosa flashed a grin as she produced a gold coin. "One toss. Heads, I win; tails, you win. Does that sound fair?"

Liz nodded meekly. Rosa curled her fingers as though holding a flagon of ale and set the coin atop them.

So they toss coins in Aletia too, Hiro thought.

With a sharp ping, the disc went spinning up into the air. It came down again to land in Rosa's hand.

"Heads." She smiled. "It seems I win." With a smug smile, she claimed the ring. Liz looked on in dismay.

Sensing the time was right, Hiro stepped in. "I'm glad that's settled. Come on, we still need to get dressed for the banquet."

Liz rose wordlessly to her feet and shoved him out of the room. He looked back in confusion just as the door slammed shut in his face.

"Go and think about what you've done," came a voice from the other side. "And learn to make a decision while you're at it."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

Her anger radiated even through the door, leaving him trembling like a rain-soaked puppy.

A Man Named Lox

"This war will soon reach its end, my king." The deep voice addressed the roofless carriage. "What will you do once it is over?"

"Once it's over?" asked the boy within from his seat on the sofa.

"Indeed. Soon we will have the peace we have been fighting for." Lox van Lebering turned his almond eyes to the sky. No clouds marred the blue. Sunlight showered down upon the plain, where wildflowers swayed contently in the breeze. "No matter how they struggle, they cannot stop us now."

He looked back down in time to catch the boy's black eyes gazing into the distance for a moment before quietly lowering again.

"Then I will have served my purpose," the boy said. "I will dissolve the Crow Legion and disband the Black Hand."

Lox had intended to ask about the boy's plans for himself, not his army, but he knew better than to press the point. Any further probing would only be deflected. With a sigh, he accepted the answer at face value.

"And that satisfies you? Even once war's fires no longer rage, its embers will still smolder. You will still be needed."

"It is statesmen the coming age will need, not generals. Peacetime doesn't have any use for military men like us. We'll only get in the way."

Lox nodded thoughtfully. True enough, it was not might that would build the next era, but the will to soothe the people's woes, to see the land prosper, to reach out to other nations in friendship, and to build a lasting peace. What had once been the stuff of daydreams was slowly becoming reality, but the price would be leaving a large number of soldiers with nowhere to go. War had gripped the land for a long, long time. Few people even remembered what peace was like. Men who had only ever known battle would struggle to exist in a world without it, let alone find success there.

Lox's concerns must have shown on his face, because the boy cracked a rueful smile. "Well, I'm sure it'll turn out all right in the end. That's what we've fought for, after all." He paused. "So, what will you do once the war is over?"

Lox hesitated. "I mean to build a nation of my own, my king. A land free from discrimination, where all may join hands as one."

"You mean to leave the empire?" The boy's eyebrows rose in surprise.

Lox nodded uncomfortably. "I do."

He had expected a lecture. Instead, he received an encouraging smile.

"As long as you won't regret it. Your position is a lot to throw away."

"My mind has long been made up. This has been my dream since this conflict began."

The end of the war would rob many of their purpose, leaving them questioning where to go. Lox would create a sanctuary for those people—an ideal nation where all could join hands in harmony and none need be left behind.

"Let me help you. After all the battles you've won for me, it's the least I can do." With a low chuckle, the boy stretched out a hand to the sky. "It's nice, isn't it? When we started out, we were all marching in step, but now we're going our separate ways."

He closed his eyes and smiled, but the sight only struck Lox with anguish. He knew what this boy had endured. A surge of emotion overcame him.

"My king," he said, "you need only give us the order—" As soon as he spoke

the words, he realized his error and clapped a hand over his mouth.

The boy's brow furrowed sadly. "You can't talk like that, Lox. Not if you're going to build a nation of your own."

He stopped his carriage and climbed out. Lox hurriedly dismounted and matched his pace.

"We're on the cusp of winning everything we've fought for, Lox. I couldn't ask for anything more," he said, adding under his breath, "That would be too much."

Lox heard that last whisper and stopped, leaving the boy to walk ahead alone. Gazing in dismay at his king's receding back, he clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, cursing his own foolishness.

"It is for you that I build this nation as much as for anybody else," he murmured.

Nobody had survived the war unscathed. Even this boy-king had accumulated many sins and collected many scars. That was all the more reason to create a land of peace, where the wounded could heal free from suffering. Neither zlostas nor humans could live alone. They needed the support of others to survive.

"And I will be there for you, my king, until you are healed," he whispered to himself before running ahead to rejoin his liege.

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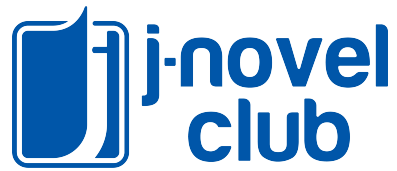
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by Tatematsuri

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